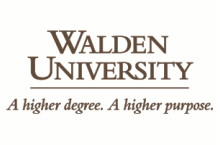

2020

School Social Workers and Perceived Barriers When Providing Services to LGBTQ Children

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Jason Ray Bullard

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

School Social Workers and Perceived Barriers When Providing Services to LGBTQ Children

by

Jason Ray Bullard

MSW, Tulane University, 2013

BA, Butler University, 2012

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

November 2020

Abstract

The proliferation of bias and prejudicial attitudes towards the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) community have been studied and empirically recognized throughout modern history. School social workers, as the school-to-home mental health liaison, have a duty to protect and support vulnerable populations of students. Research supports the overarching need for specific support provision for young LGBTQ children as they often report not feeling safe or supported within educational settings, leading to an overall decreased sense of wellbeing. This study, based on critical race theory as well as normative theory and democracy, used qualitative semistructured interviews with six elementary and middle school social workers who worked in Southeast Louisiana school districts to determine what perceived barriers may preclude their ability to provide services to young LGBTQ students. Eight major barriers are discussed: (a) time; (b) lack of LGBTQ-specific education; (c) heteronormativity built into the school system; (d) administration, teacher, and parental barriers; (e) children's understanding and ability to express themselves; (f) policies and procedures; (g) geographic location barriers; and (h) religiosity and political barriers. Participants collectively voiced a concern with lack of education for all persons within the educational arena. Understanding the perceived barriers when attempting to provide mental-health services to young LGBTQ students is a step towards positive social change by coordinating efforts to recognize and respond to the unique needs of young LGBTQ children within the school setting and toward making the world a more equal and better place for all students.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the all of the young children who know that they feel differently from their peers but do not yet know how to seek support and guidance that is open and affirming. All of the countless numbers of young LGBTQ children who do not know who to turn to and find it difficult to go to school on a daily basis, you are the inspiration to my pursuit of higher academic attainment to continue to advance my ability to recognize, advocate for, and advance the field of social work to better meet your needs.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

The proliferation of bias and prejudicial attitudes towards the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) community have been studied and empirically recognized throughout modern history (Higa et al., 2014; The Human Rights Campaign, 2019; National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2019; Palmer & Greytak, 2017). Discrimination, hatred, marginalization, and oppression are seen in everyday subtle and overt ways within the modern U.S. school systems, which actively deny students' gender identity and sexual orientation expression (Atterberry-Ash, Speer, Kattari, & Kinney, 2019). Public schooling and education in the United States are tasked with the legal, ethical, and moral obligation to provide equal access to education and personal safety to every student in society (Moe, Bacon, & Leggett, 2015). Savage and Schanding (2013) revealed that these vulnerable children often do not feel safe within their school buildings due to microaggressions and anti-LGBTQ epithets, which are witnessed or heard 43% of the time from peers and 10% of the time from teachers and administrators. Research data have indicated an apparent strong message to LGBTQ children in school, and within the larger society, that they are "less than" their heterosexual CIS-gendered, gender-identity matching their biologically assigned-by-birth sex, peers (Allen, 2015; Hunter, 2019; Kulick, Wernick, Espinoza, Newman, & Dessel, 2019; Ullman & Ferfolja, 2015).

School social workers, identified as significant support figures on educational campuses, must to be able to address the needs of this vulnerable population (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018; Sherman, 2016). The pervasive negative factors, such as increased

risk to self-harm, increased susceptibility for suicidal ideation, increased associations with homelessness for the LGBTQ population, increased risk-taking behaviors, and decreased supportive services, contributing to disparities in the overall health and well-being of young LGBTQ members should be recognized and challenged within U.S. school-systems that are creating hostile, unsafe, harmful environments being recapitulated on a daily basis (Higa et al., 2014). The school social worker is an allied mental health provider hired by the school who is specially trained to work with vulnerable populations and multiculturally diverse groups of students (Pack & Brown, 2017).

Middle school and elementary school social workers are an underutilized asset to young LGBTQ students who need to be particularly knowledgeable about how they can enrich their developmental trajectories (Balsam, Beadnell, & Molina, 2013). The school social worker as an integral, specially positioned member of the school staff needs to be highly visible as an ally for this population to ensure that diversity exposure and acceptance is not only talked about but also entrenched in the culture of the school, home, and community where they are employed (Moe et al., 2015). The advancement of protective factors for LGBTQ children has shown to not only enhance the well-being of LGBTQ students but the entire population as a whole (Jones, 2016).

Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) have shown to be associated with positive youth development towards developing positive identity formation and through specific social support for young LGBTQ members as a way to feel safety in numbers, increased sense of identity and self-esteem, and increased support within the school system (Marx &

Kettrey, 2016; McCormick, Schmidt, & Clifton, 2015). The support provided from structured extracurriculars, such as GSAs, provide intentional integration of safety in the learning environment for all students, LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ (Ioverno, Belser, Baiocco, Grossman, & Russell, 2019; Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Poteat, Heck, Yoshikawa, & Calzo, 2017). These findings regarding GSAs show that there is a need for specific supports for young LGBTQ students within U.S. educational facilities; however, GSAs almost exclusively function within high schools, and rarely middle school climates, leaving little to no support for younger elementary and middle school students (McCormick et al., 2015; Sandowski, 2017).

Urban area schools, specifically, have been cited as having an advantage in the arena of understanding the complexities of working with marginalized students (Fredman, Schultz, & Hoffman, 2015). Due to urban-area schools being comprised of diverse groups of students with differing gender, race, ethnicity, ability, and class, they are often more equipped to expand their already unique ability to combat oppression to include sexual minority students (Fredman et al., 2015). Organizations that are actively working towards combatting negative harassment and oppression in the school system are useful in assisting marginalized children from a variety of intersectional identities.

In this study, I sought to research and disseminate information regarding how school social workers can effectively provide culturally competent and appropriate services for LGBTQ children within the heteronormative school system, specifically through examining the perceived barriers of school social workers employed in elementary and middle school settings to provide a context of mis- or non-understandings

that may be able to be addressed by the social work community. Due to the aforementioned lack of programming for LGBTQ children in elementary and middle school settings and the presumed possible protective factor of being enrolled in an urban, diverse school environment, this qualitative study addressed elementary and middle school social workers' ability to provide services to support young LGBTQ children in a southeast Louisiana school district.

In Section 1, I introduce the qualitative, individual interview study designed to explore the perceived barriers school social workers face when providing culturally competent services to young LGBTQ children in elementary and middle schools in southeast Louisiana. Section 1 addresses the problem, the study's purpose, the research question, significance, and the theoretical framework. I further introduce background context for the study, nature of the study, data types and sources of information, limitations, challenges, and barriers of the study.

Problem Statement

Elementary and middle school-aged LGBTQ students are provided with little to no services that recognize, support, advocate for, and provide open acceptance for their gender identities or sexual orientations due to the overall heteronormative stance of society in the United States (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). This heteronormative custom, which is embedded into the pedagogical policies and procedures of educational facilities in the United States, regards heterosexuality as the norm and as the only acceptable form of relationships (Wagaman, Obejero, & Gregory, 2018). LGBTQ children in elementary and middle school are two to five times more likely to experience

a mental health condition such as depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide due to this discrimination (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2019).

Social workers are prepared through their educational advancement within accredited institutions to work within the multicultural world (Drechsler, Hessenauer, & Jaber-Wilson, 2020; Small, Nikolova, & Sharma, 2017). Licensed school social workers, then, are educated to have understanding and ability to provide services that are appropriate and meet the multicultural needs of a variety of diverse identities, including LGBTQ individuals, in culturally competent ways (Jani, Osteen, & Shipe, 2016; Robinson, Cross-Denny, Lee, Werkmeister Rozas, & Yamada, 2016). Systematic issues within school systems in the United States create obstacles that can prevent school social workers from providing these services to young LGBTQ children in overt and covert ways (Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013; Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Kvam, 2018; Robinson et al., 2016; Rosenblum & Travis, 2016).

Within elementary and middle school settings, there is resistance paired with outdated policies that preclude the ability for educators and school employees to appropriately integrate LGBTQ-positive education through lessons and teacher professional developments (Wright-Maley, Davis, Gonzalez, & Colwell, 2016). Ullman and Ferfolja (2015) specifically discussed outdated and pathologizing policies in educational settings within the United States, pointing out that schools often create policies that are delineated for boys and girls, which further enforces a gender-binary outlook on how children are educated. Gender-binary enforcement, in this context, is the qualification that each person has to identify as either being a boy or a girl, which leaves

no room for sexual or gender diversity (Ullman & Ferfolja, 2015). Gender-binary enforcement in educational facilities, such as gender-specific uniform policies and jewelry policies, continue to ensure that cis-gender, heterosexual values are pronounced and facilitate the erasure of LGBTQ topics from the classroom (Kearns, Mitton-Kükner, & Tompkins, 2017; Wagner & Crowley, 2020). Students experience microaggressions due to nonconformance to the steadfast intuitional adherence to gender binary outlooks and heteronormativity indoctrinated from the top, administration, down to the students (Austin, Craig, Dentato, Roseman, & McInroy, 2019; Miller & Grollman, 2015).

These microaggressions are subtle, everyday slights aimed at LGBTQ children that perpetuate stigmas and contribute to the negative view of these vulnerable students. Teachers may inadvertently display microaggression towards a young LGBTQ child by insinuating that girls play with dolls and boys play with trucks, that boys do not cry, or that every family consists of a mother and a father figure (Francis & Reygan, 2016). Completely avoiding the recognition of LGBTQ topics and not being able to openly talk about LGBTQ issues (overt) paired with not being able to train staff on LGBTQ issues and daily enforcement through microaggressions (covert) creates an atmosphere that is not aligned with the school social worker's duty to protect all students and commitment to provide equal access to education without oppression in the elementary and middle school setting (Austin et al., 2019).

Providing culturally competent services to young LGBTQ students include the ability to ensure feelings of safety and support within the school community (Palmer & Greytak, 2017). Feeling safe and supported in ones' school provides conditions that allow

the elementary or middle school student to feel secure in "coming out," which includes the ability to disclose one's sexual orientation, also referred to as "affectional orientation," or gender identity, which has shown to be a mitigating protective factor for LGBTQ children (Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013; Kosciw et al., 2015). Students who are in a school that has specific support for the unique needs of LGBTQ students, representation of LGBTQ persons, and knowledgeable professionals regarding the needs of this population can foster the resilience of "being out" in the educational environment, which leads to higher academic success and overall improved psychological and health well-being (Kosciw et al., 2015).

The problem is that although social workers are trained to work in a multicultural world, there are systematic issues that thwart their ability to provide school social work services that adequately meet the specific support needs of young LGBTQ children, especially within the elementary and middle school setting (Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013; Garbers, Heck, Gold, Santelli, & Bersamin, 2018). The ramifications of these systematic obstacles for young LGBTQ children include higher rates of suicide, increased peer victimization, homelessness by choice to avoid negative situations or forced by parents throwing them out of their house, substance abuse, and increased risk-taking behaviors such as riskier sexual practices (Palmer & Greytak, 2017). This study addresses a gap in practice by examining what perceived barriers are present that are limiting the multiculturally-trained school social worker from providing LGBTQ-specific services to young elementary and middle school students in an effort to change the system to best support these young LGBTQ children.

For example, heteronormativity is the indoctrinated belief that regulates who is allowed to live a "normal" inconspicuous social life, and whose lives will be regulated by everyday behaviors, messages, and laws (Rosenblum & Travis, 2016). Heteronormativity is reflected in the belief that individuals are identified either as male or female, and these two genders must both be represented in order to equate to roles in a relationship that are reliant on one another (Lasio, Serri, Ibba, & Manuel De Oliveira, 2019). As microcosms of broader society, schools perpetuate and enforce the values, views, and prejudices of the larger heteronormative societal stance (Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013; Kvam, 2018; Savage & Schanding, 2013). Within school systems, this is exampled by the overt enforcement of gender and sexuality representation in classroom curriculum, content of educational materials, and student restrooms designations, as well as the covert erasure of LGBTQ lives in the classroom lesson content (Dinkins & Englert, 2015; Hoang, 2019; Ingraham, 1994; McBride & Schubotz, 2017).

The multiple ways that the system either covertly or overtly misaligns with the school social worker's ability to provide services to this specific population should be examined as Moe et al. (2015) affirmed the need for school mental health providers to be specific, visible allies to this young population of LGBTQ students on all educational campuses. While the correlation between heteronormative society and adverse risk factors on the health, mental health, and well-being of LGBTQ children has been addressed abundantly in research, the perceived barriers of school social workers in attempting to provide culturally competent services to young LGBTQ students was examined in this study, as there is empirical evidence postulating that sexual minority

children have increased risk factors due to lack of school connectedness and that supportive relationships can mitigate these adverse outcomes within the school setting (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hoang, 2019; Joyce, 2015). As the school-to-home liaison, the school social worker is tasked with ensuring and advocating for all students to remove any barriers, perceived or actual, that may be precluding them from accessing education equal to their peers (Sherman, 2016). This study further expands the knowledge base for school social work practice by investigating the perceived barriers that school social workers encounter when attempting to provide culturally competent services to young LGBTQ children within the current educational system in a southeast Louisiana school district (see Atterberry-Ash et al., 2019; Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004). Determining the perceived barriers via the viewpoint of the school social workers when attempting to provide services to this especially vulnerable group of children is paramount to improving the safety needs of young LGBTQ children.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to explore the perceived barriers school social workers encounter when providing services to young LGBTQ children in elementary and middle schools in a southeast Louisiana school district. Specifically, while social workers are trained to work in a multicultural world, there seems to be an underresearched gap in how this is aligned or misaligned with the viewpoint of the educational system that hinders their ability to fully meet the needs of this young LGBTQ population (Garbers et al., 2018). School social workers are on the frontlines, pioneering connections, supporting, providing guidance, providing resources, and advocating for

students within their educational settings (Isaksson & Larsson, 2017; Sherman, 2016). School social workers, as the school-based mental health professionals, are tasked with ensuring the safety, health, and wellbeing of all students by ensuring the entire school atmosphere is safe, especially for minority children (Abreu, Black, Mosley, & Fedewa, 2016; NASW, 2017). This study was designed to support the needs of school social workers by exploring what perceived barriers may be precluding them from being able to provide appropriate services to this especially vulnerable population of children and how to best support systematic changes that can best meet the needs of young LGBTQ students in elementary and middle school settings.

The research question is as follows:

What are the perceived barriers school social workers experience when providing services to young LGBTQ children in elementary and middle school settings in a southeast Louisiana school district?

Definitions of Key Terms and Concepts

The literature uses a multitude of terms, abbreviations, and definitions when describing the LGBTQ populations. Interchangeable and increasingly shifting to include and not include other members of society, the umbrella terms GLB, LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQIA, and LGBTQ+ have been used throughout located scholarly sources in the past 5-year search. For the purposes of this study, I have chosen to use the acronym LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning) as the umbrella term used to represent the population of individual and communities being discussed although it should be recognized that this does not fully represent the multitude of individuals,

communities, and persons who may identify as part of this community. As language and inclusivity continues to broaden and sometimes become more specific, throughout the years, this chosen acronym has been merely used to be concise and consistent for the purposes of this study and not to inadvertently disenfranchise further or exclude any members of the community who do not identify with the specific acronym chosen.

Affectional orientation: A synonym for "sexual orientation" that displays that not all members of society are oriented by sex or sexuality (Parker, Dickens, & Herlihy, 2019).

Barriers: Social workers typically work as part of a multidisciplinary team and not in isolation; this is no different for school social workers. Barriers are any identified sources that impede the ability of the social worker to carry out their mental health professional roles in their respective field, which can provide implications for and understanding of the important necessities the social worker may feel they need to conduct their job professionally, ethically, and to the benefit of their respective clients (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016). It is important to note, for the purposes of this study, barriers can be real or perceived by the individual social worker.

Cisgender: Individual whose sex assigned at birth is in alignment with their internal and/or external presentation of gender *(*Austin et al., 2019; Knutson, Koch, Sneed, Lee, & Chung, 2020).

Coming out: A nonlinear process in which a self-identified individual discloses their gender identity or sexual orientation to family, peer, or community (Ali & Barden, 2015; Fields et al., 2015). Coming out has been recently renegotiated to a cyclical pattern

comprised of an LGBTQ individual having to continually disclose their identity over and over throughout their lifetime in multiple contexts (Ali & Barden, 2015). Coming out has been associated with both positive and negative effects on health, mental health, and well-being (Belous, Wampler, & Warmels-Herring, 2015).

Cultural competence: A fundamental attribute of the social work profession. Social workers who work with diverse groups of marginalized individuals, who historically were defined as populations that were non-White, have now come to include many different intersectional identities of sexuality, gender identity, religion, ability, and sexual orientation (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Cultural competence specifically examines and mandates that social workers work with individuals and systems in a respectful, ethical, and effective manner, regardless of their marginalized identities, to best provide support and transformation on the behalf of the clients for whom they provide services (NASW, 2015, 2017).

Heteronormativity: The privileged default of human sexual identity and presumption of heterosexuality that is engrained in every aspect of society that is scaffolded by the laws, customs, norms, policies, and practices of the group of individuals, which actively, in overt or subtle ways, recapitulates the degradation, denigration, oppression, marginalization, and erasure of nonheterosexual individuals (Allen, 2015).

LGBTQ: Umbrella term or acronym specifically selected for this study to succinctly represent the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning community of individuals.

Microaggression: Short, everyday slights that are aimed at minority members of society that perpetuate stigma, stereotypes, harassment, and oppression of individuals that are not of the majority, which contribute to negative mental health and wellbeing of the intended victims (Bialer & McIntosh, 2016).

Semistructured interview: Semistructured qualitative interviews are a purposeful conversation that uses a predetermined set of questions arranged in an interview guide, based on previous knowledge gathered by the researcher, with improvised use of follow-up probes as needed to cover the main topics of the study (Kallio, Pietlä, Johnson, & Kangasneimi, 2016).

Nature of the Doctoral Project

To explore and better understand the perceived barriers school social workers face when attempting to provide culturally competent services to young LGBTQ children, I used a qualitative inquiry design by way of a constructivist approach that seeks to interview, collect, interpret, analyze, and construct how the social workers understand their realities within the school environment (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Exploring the phenomenon of perceived barriers within the educational system and provision of specific services to LGBTQ children was achieved through individual, semistructured interviews with school social workers who are currently providing services to students in elementary and middle school settings in a southeast Louisiana school district (see Babbie, 2017). These social workers' experiences are unique to their individual practices, and I sought to explore their perceived barriers through data obtained within individual

semistructured interviews with a purposefully sampled homogenous groups of school social workers (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Significance of the Study

High schools that emphasize GSA and sexual orientation or gender expression actively identified LGBTQ-specific supports as part of their antibullying or antidiscrimination initiatives (Craig, McInroy, & Austin, 2018; Wright, Roach, & Yukins, 2012). Existing school-based mental health services and school supports for LGBTQ students have been documented as inadequate and underrecognized beyond GSA clubs in the high school setting; however, support for elementary and middle school children is almost nonexistent due to the current state of system within U.S. educational facilities (Craig et al., 2018; Sandowski, 2017). The results of this study provide insight into the current practice gap in understanding what perceived barriers to culturally competent school social work services may be being inhibited by the system that creates an atmosphere that does not allow them to appropriately implement knowledge, advocate for, and acknowledge, with sensitivity, this vulnerable population of young LGBTQ children within elementary and middle school campuses.

The Human Rights Campaign (2019) reported that 42% of LGBTQ children feel their community is not accepting of LGBTQ people, and 92% of the nation's youth say they hear negative messages about being LGBTQ, most significantly in their schools, on the internet, and from elected leaders. Further, Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, and Palmer (2012) posited that 86% of students reported being verbally harassed, 38% reported being physically harassed, and 18% reported being physically assaulted due to

their real or perceived sexual orientation. School social workers, as the school-to-home mental health liaisons, have a professional ethical responsibility to protect and support vulnerable populations of students (NASW, 2017). Research supports the overarching need for elementary and middle school social workers to be able to provide appropriate and culturally competent services to the young LGBTQ child population (Birkett, Newcomb, & Mustanski, 2015; Gegenfutner & Gebhardt, 2017; Kull, Greytak, Kosciw, & Villenas, 2016; Moe et al., 2015). However, systematic issues hinder the school social worker's ability to meet their needs, which results in higher risk of suicide, bullying, harassment, early and problematic drug and alcohol usage, and risky sexual practices (Birkett et al., 2015; Kull et al., 2016).

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The current study was based on critical theory, which is rooted in the rejection of the status quo and the need to promote the emancipation of those who lack power in society (Cheng, 2005; Habermas, 1984; Horkheimer, 1972; Stahl, Doherty, Shaw, & Janicke, 2014). Due to the overall heteronormative influence of U.S. society, which is embedded into the pedagogical policies and procedures of elementary and middle schools, students are provided with little to no services that recognize, support, advocate for, and provide open acceptance to their gender identities or sexual orientations (Wagaman et al., 2018). Understanding the perceived barriers to providing culturally competent mental-health services to young LGBTQ students is the first step in coordinating efforts to recognize and respond to the unique needs of young LGBTQ

children within the school setting towards making the world a more equal and better place for all (Urban & Kujinga, 2017).

Critical Theory

Critical theory is defined by the view that human beings need to be emancipated from the slaveries, oppression, marginalization, and disenfranchisement created by their society and culture due to the individual's minority status-identity (Horkheimer, 1972). The critical theory posits that there are multiple realities in society and that these realities are influenced by the oppressions of the context in which the reality was created (Horkheimer, 1993). Critical theory explains that knowledge, and language of that knowledge, is created by those who have power, and that this knowledge does not represent the experiences of the marginalized and oppressed individuals who lack power (Habermas, 1984). From this viewpoint, emancipation and liberation are achieved through creation of a world that does not decrease the freedoms of any one of the members of society, regardless of identity statuses (Horkheimer, 1972, 1993).

Normative Theory and Democracy

Democracy is dependent on consensus; however, democratic beliefs are founded on the explicit violation of freedoms of minority status individuals (Przeworki & Wallerstein, 1988). The deliberate exclusion of minority individuals maintains and recapitulates the monopoly of power that is maintained by the majority, which then becomes publicly agreed upon and enforced to continue to marginalize and disenfranchise the minority (Bohman, 1991, 1997). Critical theory disassembles this by first starting with those who have power, for example, school social workers in this study,

to create an educational environment that satisfies the needs of all students and not just the majority members of society through emancipation and liberation (see Bohman, 1999; Horkheimer, 1972). Through qualitative research, I sought to delineate a subjective look at the school social workers' perspectives of perceived barriers to culturally competent service provisions for young LGBTQ children through a politically charged lens of empowerment, emancipation, and liberation. To overcome the created sense of totality and recognize the voiceless members of society's needs and promote equality I sought to gain a greater understanding of the current societal norms and context that enforces the disenfranchisement of young LGBTQ children within the educational arena.

Values and Ethics

This qualitative, semistructured, individual interview study is aligned with the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (2017) and the supplemental guide provided through the NASW Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice (NASW, 2015). The NASW Code of Ethics enforces that social workers can only provide ethical services if they value the dignity and worth of every individual they serve by meeting the cultural and ethnic diversity of needs they possess in a competent manner. Specifically, "social workers should promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally" (NASW, 2015, p.15).

Examining school social workers' perceived barriers while attempting to provide specific services to meet the needs of young LGBTQ children in a southeast Louisiana school district ties into the NASW Code of Ethics mission to ensure that equality and

social justice advocacy is provided to these extremely vulnerable young people in society (NASW, 2017). By understanding the perceived barriers with this specific population, this study further disseminates information as part of an overall strategy to promote positive social change and ensure better support for all children in school systems, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation, meeting the NASW value of advancing the field of social work through scholarly research (NASW, 2017). Positive social change is the purposeful process of coordinating efforts to promote greater equality, dignity, and enhancement of life for those who are disadvantaged by society (Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor, 2009; Walden University, 2015, 2017). Results of this study contribute to the betterment of society through a greater understanding of the perceived barriers that may be precluding school social workers in elementary and middle schools from being able to adequately provide services to young LGBTQ members to create systematic changes to better support these vulnerable children.

Because school social workers are tasked with ensuring the mental health and wellbeing of students daily, understanding the perceived barriers of these social workers in providing specific services to young LGBTQ members is imperative to improving their ability to service this vulnerable population of children. Understanding the perceived barriers is the first step in coordinating efforts to recognize and respond to the unique needs of young LGBTQ students within the school setting towards making the world a more equal and better place for all (Urban & Kujinga, 2017). Creating safe and supportive environments for all children, regardless of "affectional orientation" or gender expression and free from bias, prejudice, and marginalization aligns not only with the

Walden University (2017) mission of social change but also with the NASW (2017) Code of Ethics. This study pioneers a greater understanding of how to support school social workers in providing culturally competent services for young LGBTQ students to enhance their ability to create safer school environments for all students.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Literature Review Strategy

Articles selected relate to school social workers' provision of culturally competent services to young LGBTQ children. Through searches in the Walden University Library system, search engines were used to find pertinent articles from the last 5-year range through ERIC, SAGE Knowledge, SAGE Journals, and the Thoreau multidatabase search. Searches beyond the current literature within the last 5 years were conducted to locate and situate historical understandings and background information to gain a greater insight into the concepts of heteronormativity within the United States and Western world, as well as to glean important seminal work regarding theoretical foundations.

The key words searched were *LGBTQ, critical theory, children, school social workers, heteronormative, mental-health, U.S. education, barriers, social work ethics, LGB, LGBTQIA, LGBTQ+,* and *school* in the aforementioned databases. Results yielded approximately 3,000 articles, with approximately 80 within the scholarly period selected for this literature search. There is a dearth of literature related to school social workers, and social workers in general, in the provision of services for the LGBTQ population of young people in the United States. Craig, Dentato, Messinger, and McInroy (2016) posited that social workers provide more mental health services to all groups of

disadvantaged individuals than any other allied health profession, so then it stands to reason that they should be especially equipped to work with this specific population of LGBTQ children more than other school-based mental health professionals.

Specifically, the existence of specific services with the LGBTQ population are scarce in the literature, as exampled by the NASW (2015) Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice, which merely cited LGBTQ populations as a special diverse community to consider in one instance in the 60-page document. The NASW (2017) Code of Ethics also described the need for social work professionals to provide culturally competent mental health services; however, both of these guiding documents for the profession do not mention specific attitudes, knowledge, or skills needed to be provide ethical and appropriate services to this community. Due to the apparent lack of research specific to young LGBTQ children, and school social workers' provision of culturally competent services to this especially vulnerable group of young people, sources were located regarding social work practitioner's preparedness to work with LGBTQ members, high school populations, and LGBTQ adults to provide a parallel process to work off of for this study.

Background of Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is comprised of the cultural and societal norms within the United States that creates a system of oppression that maintains the privileged default and presumption of human sexual identity of heterosexuality (Weinstock, 2019). The concept of heteronormativity cuts through every aspect of modern society, which justifies harassment and discrimination of non-LGBTQ individuals (Michaels, Parent, & Torrey,

2016). Heteronormativity has a specific connection with critical theory as the emancipatory need is seen in microaggressions, or short everyday verbal, behavioral, and environmental slights towards minority nonheterosexual people, which continues to disempower and oppresses people who are not heterosexual, enforced by dominant heterosexual masculinity (Fields et al., 2015).

Family, peer, and community assumptions of heteronormative masculinity impose the prevalence of heteronormativity, leading to internalized homophobia in heterosexual and nonheterosexual individuals. Internalized homophobia results in cognitive dissonance, increased rates of suicidal ideation, and rates of suicidal attempts for LGBTQ people (Allen, 2015; Michaels et al., 2016). The concept of heteronormativity showcases the need to identify and examine privileging beliefs within communities and challenge, not just accept, their normalcy that perpetuates stigma and oppression of others. Antioppressive and emancipatory perspectives, according to Pack and Brown (2017), are the cornerstone of social work. Within all environments, organizations, establishments, and agencies, these perspectives are employed to address and advocate for groups who exert power over another through institutionalized means.

Heteronormativity in U.S. Educational Institutions

As previously discussed, heteronormativity plagues almost every institution in the United States (Ingraham, 1994; Weinstock, 2019). Discrimination and discriminatory practices towards young LGBTQ children within U.S. educational facilities are largely uninterrupted by staff, other students, parents, and community members (Atterberry-Ash et al., 2019). Social stigmatization is prevalent throughout U.S. culture and is at the

foundation of almost every law, policy, and practice, which indoctrinates the beliefs of young people taught in these facilities. Hoang (2019) further posited that children reared in a heteronormative society are shown, read about, and learn about the presumption of heterosexuality from a young age. These teachings and images that surround the culture then leave little to no room for young people to imagine any alternate reality, leading to a cognitive dissonance or internalized struggle when they do not see their lives being validated (Hoang, 2019).

Insufficient support in the school system creates a breeding ground for harassment, violence, isolation, and exclusion that is seen as normalized and warranted to maintain the status quo, heterosexuality, and erase the difference, nonheterosexuality (Ingraham, 1994). This belief that only biologically assigned opposite sexes can be attracted to one another creates the human norm that anything else is deviant, unnatural, sinful, immoral, weird, not appropriate, and wrong (Fredman et al., 2015; Suen et al., 2020). Advantages are afforded to those who conform (Hoang, 2019; Ingraham, 1994; McBride & Schubotz, 2017). Children who do not conform to the heterosexual norms and concepts are not represented, not protected, and not visible within the indoctrinated heteronormativity and conservative Christian value cornerstones of the modern United States educational institution (Kulick et al., 2019; McBride & Schubotz, 2017). Disadvantages, bullying, school refusal, and academic failure are just a few negative impacts on LGBTQ children's inequality to receive access to education (Dessel, Kulick, Wernick, & Sullivan, 2017).

LGBTQ bullying and discrimination in U.S. educational institutions. Bullying is a serious issue in modern education. Bullying towards children who identify as part of the LGBTQ community or who are perceived to be part of the LGBTQ community is a biproduct of the heteronormative gender norms that police sexuality and sexual identity (Kulick et al., 2019). Kull et al. (2016) empirically demonstrated school districts' need to develop policies that reflect the needs of LGBTQ student populations to be able to adequately provide safe learning environments free of the fear of harassment in which they can access education equal to their heterosexual peers. School districts with antibullying policies that explicitly mention sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression protections were the most effective as LGBTQ students report feeling increased safety and less homophobia or heteronormativity; however, the majority of educational facilities in the United States fail to mention LGBTQ issues at all or simply add LGBTQ concerns to the already created policies as an afterthought (Kull et al., 2016; Robinson & Espelage, 2012). Papadaki (2016) posited that the lack of sexual orientation issues that are included in educational facilities antibullying and other policies is a further representation of heteronormativity that is embedded into the pedagogical environment.

Increased suicidal ideation and decreased overall wellbeing. School districts not only permit but perpetuate indoctrinated gender binary, heteronormative Christian values (McBride & Schubotz, 2017). School lessons, textbooks, images, and ideas do not permit the idea of "normal" nonheterosexual individuals in society (Allen, 2015). Instead, schools provide uniform policies, gendered sports, haircut and jewelry policies, bathroom and locker room allocation, and disciplinary policies that actively seek to disconfirm and

erase the existence of LGBTQ communities (Kulick et al., 2019; McBride & Schubotz, 2017; Snapp, Hoenig, Fields, & Russell, 2015). The lack of gender identity development and sexual orientation understanding from school staff and officials leads to a complete denigration of LGBTQ students' self-identity, self-esteem, support, and safety.

Atterberry-Ash et al. (2019) suggested that microaggressions and harmful discord are often most numerously identified as bullying towards LGBTQ children, and more often than not, these types of degrading remarks and perpetuations of harmful heteronormativity go unchecked or unnoticed by adults. Seelman, Forge, Walls, and Bridges (2015) asserted that schools are the key environment in which children are ridiculed, harassed, and victimized for young LGBTQ identities. One example, from Porta et al. (2017), lies in the issue of gendered bathrooms and locker rooms, which they found to be a commonplace of anxiety and isolation for the student respondents based on fears of being uncomfortable, being harmed, and being judged. These findings, paired with Kulick et al.'s (2019) research, revealed that school-based sports and physical education play a specific role in the negative impacts on young LGBTQ children. The adverse impacts create an atmosphere of emotional distress, school avoidance, substance use, and overall negative wellbeing for LGBTQ students due to unequal acceptance and access to normal activities in the school arena that is not true for their heterosexual counterparts.

Without specific inclusion of sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression protections explicitly mentioned as part of school-wide policies, which are typically skimmed over and not forthcoming with explicit mention of LGBTQ-related

issues, the school's atmosphere, which is already a hostile atmosphere of heteronormativity, is further compounded (Kull et al., 2016). Without specific protection, young LGBTQ children are bullied and victimized at higher rates than their heterosexual peers, which results in increased suicidal ideation, increased suicide attempts, internalized discord, depression, shame, anger, fear, vulnerability, depression, grief, avoidance of school and other environments, isolation, increased risky sexual activity, and increased drug and substance usage (Ali & Barden, 2015; McCormick et al., 2015).

Developmental Considerations and Difficulties for LGBTQ Children

Development of sexuality or gender identity is a challenge for young LGBTQ children without specific supports due to the overarching heteronormativity and homophobia indoctrinated into institutions (Seelman et al., 2015). Social development is hijacked by identification as part of the LGBTQ community due to fear, isolation, and emotional distress that interrupts positive psychological and emotional wellbeing (Kulick et al., 2019). Identification of being nonheterosexual is typically left up to the individual, and the conversation has to start with the child feeling confident and comfortable to openly discuss this with their parents, friends, teachers, and community (Olson et al., 2019). Internalized conflict due to religiosity, confusion, and internalized homogeneity cloud the ability for young LGBTQ children to positively cope with their feelings and identification (Lytle, Blosnich, De Luca, & Brownson, 2018).

Kohlberg (1966) discussed, in his Theory of Gender Development, that children already identify whether they are male or female around three to five years of age. Ages six to seven encompass children's ability to delineate differences in behavioral and

personality patterns of males and females (Kohlberg, 1966). These gender roles are fairly concrete, and almost nonnegotiable in society. Gender roles explicitly direct how society determines a person is to act, think, desire, behave, and react (Kohlberg, 1966). Further, because gender norms vary from society to society, culture to culture, these concepts are taught to children, from birth, and constructs how they will be expected to get along in society for the remainder of their lives. Children's own self-concepts, at a young age, will affect how their interpersonal relationships will be throughout their lifespan; thus, being different than others at a young age can thwart a child's ability to connect and maintain interpersonal relationships for the remainder of their lives (Beal, 1994; Seelman et al., 2015).

As children meet developmental milestones, in school, they are increasingly moving towards independence and being prepared to be successful in life as positive members of their community. As such children are being taught how to, when to, and where to look for right and wrong. Children learn at first, to rely on adults for guidance and reassurance (Piaget, 1952; Postholm, 2019). Children, typically enjoy socializing and learn to form larger friendship groups and work cooperatively with others and learn social skills through play, school work, and class lessons throughout the school environment (Huyder, Nilsen, & Bacso, 2015). Development of an internalized, mature sense of right and wrong is developed around age ten and children become increasingly able to think abstractly moving from elementary to middle school-age (Huyder et al., 2015). This development of self, and identity are vastly different for heterosexual and nonheterosexual children; yet, we teach everyone the same way, regardless of gender or

sexual identity, and expect all children will develop towards a healthy, and well-adjusted sense of self (Klein, Holtby, Cook, & Travers, 2015).

Lack of Role Models and Invisibility in Classrooms, Lessons, and School

Student-school engagement is one specific protective factor that can predict outcomes into adulthood for young LGBTQ members (Seelman et al., 2015). Yet, without specific supportive adults in this vulnerable setting, development, happiness, and wellbeing are thwarted (Graybill & Proctor, 2016). Atterberry-Ash et al. (2019) discuss LGBTQ-issues being explicitly absent in classroom materials and underrepresented throughout educational facilities, in general. Meyer, Quantz, Taylor, and Peter's (2019) research highlighted this notion in their findings that teachers, overtly express a desire to integrate diversity components into their lesson plans; however, a lack of education and competence in LGBTQ issues has been cited as a precluding factor to successfully employ heteronormative-less educational practices. From their large-scale survey, Meyer et al. (2019) found that approximately 85% of teachers stated they would support policies for LGBTQ inclusive practices school-wide; however, only 61% of teachers reported practicing these inclusive themes in their lessons. A lack of understanding; worries about parental, and administrative push back; and lack of confidence seems to be preventing teachers from feeling comfort in mentioning, showcasing, or including LGBTQ-issues at the forefront of their lessons, teaching materials, or diversity-celebrating displays on school campuses, which further makes LGBTQ children feel invisible, or like they do not belong.

Belous et al. (2015) discussed the lack of role models for older adolescent and adult persons who embark on the coming out process, which leads to an adherence to stereotypes of a heteronormative society and a lack of developing a true, authentic self. According to this research, adolescents and adult gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning individuals typically take longer to adjust to their own identity as they cited that they typically adhere to the strict stereotypical behaviors, that can be located in media, to strive to live as part of the community and do not understand fully who they are or what they want to be (Belous et al., 2015). The lack of role models, and representation of LGBTQ individuals as just "normal," inconspicuous members of society can lead to a polarizing, confusing, and more isolated feelings in regard to self-idea and self-worth (Allen, 2015). Thus, it stands to reason, that if an adult member of the LGBTQ community has exaggerated difficulty developing their own identity during the coming out process, a young child at the precipice of understanding their LGBTQ-identity might have even more challenges.

Assumptions of Majority Identifying Students and Differences for LGBTQ Students

Thus far, it has been discussed, at length, that heterosexuality is the presumption for all individuals in U.S. society and any deviation to this normative belief can cause fear, anxiety, stress, isolation, and overall negative physical, mental, and emotional health and wellbeing. The assumption, is that, all children are able to attend school in a safe environment, in which they are able to learn social norms, develop friendships, adjust to expectations, learn how to effectively communicate with others, learn how to cope with adversity, and develop into positive, contributing adults in society (Graybill & Proctor,

2016). These assumptions are easier if an individual identifies as part of the majority; however, if deviating in any way, for the purposes of this paper, nonheterosexual identification, this trajectory is hijacked and success is not the focus of an individual who is trying to survive and thrive in the face of adversity.

Klein et al. (2015) posit that the coming out process is much more important, in respect to development, than previously discussed in the literary lineage. Bialer and McIntosh (2016) report that LGBTQ adults name coming out as the single most stressful experience in their lives. The process of coming out is not linear, in that it is a recapitulating cycle in an LGBTQ person's life from the time they decide to disclose their sexual or gender identity the first time until the reset of their lives (Ali & Barden, 2015; Klein et al., 2015). The cycle of coming out is never complete, as new environments, new locations, and new groups of people present feelings of stress and threat that stigmatization and marginalization will accompany disclosure and opportunity to either be one's authentic self or hide part of their identity from others. The internal discord and cognitive dissonance felt when deciding if disclosure is necessary, warranted, or desired in each new situation bring back the same feelings for the LGBTQ individual as the first time they disclosed and can be retraumatizing (Ali & Barden, 2015; McIntyre, Baker, & Overstreet, 2019)

Snapp et al. (2015) discussed the inequalities and disparities felt at school, due to the assumption of heterosexuality, include more severe punishments for LGBTQ students for public displays of affection, choice of expression, and nonconformity to gender expectations that are held constant for all children, regardless of gender or sexual

orientation. LGBTQ students, are an especially vulnerable population that deserves special policy provision as they typically grow up in heterosexual-parent homes and become further isolated from their families, as opposed to other minority students who grow up in a house with one or more parent that is similarly disadvantaged (Wright et al., 2012). Belous et al., (2015) cited approximately three to four percent of individuals in the U.S. identify themselves as part of the LGBTQ population, yet culturally competent services for this population are scarce, and not detailed for any mental health profession. Being part of a subset of the majority culture presents challenges for LGBTQ individuals, and adults discussed the loss of their identity in the coming out process and need to understand and adapt to a new LGBTQ culture that is not something that has to be considered or processed by heterosexual peers (Belous et al., 2015).

Porta et al. (2017) further examined the invisible discomfort felt daily by LGBTQ children when having to use the restroom. Heterosexual individuals do not have to choose, as the choice is already made for them, which restroom will be safe for them to use, and which restroom will cause them the least amount of fear of victimization. The common resulting option, in modern day, that has come to fruition in schools is to have an assigned gender-neutral restroom for transgender students; however, these restrooms are typically located in the nurse's office or teacher's lounge, which further leads to isolation and pointing out the student as different from heterosexual, CIS-gendered peers (Porta et al., 2017). Left out of this equation is nonheterosexual, nontransgendered LGBTQ children, who similarly face ridicule and harassment in gender-assigned restrooms and need (Hoang, 2019). These unsafe and threatening environments are

prevalent across school environments that are underrecognized, and or taken for granted by heterosexual peers, adults, and community members, thus the need for specific supportive adults on school campuses that can advocate for and meet the needs of vulnerable populations of children on a daily basis.

School Social Workers Meeting the Needs of This Vulnerable Population

Marrow (1993) delineates the evolution of the term "homosexuality" and shows how a negative connotation is now likened to it, providing a societal nonacceptance of this pejorative term that proves to be a source of discrimination for this group of persons. Social workers are needed to provide a visible front of support for all minority students within schools. School social workers need to promote a safe and neutral space, along with a willingness and ability to talk with children openly and freely about sexual orientation (NASW, 2017; Pack & Brown, 2017). Social workers need to keep abreast to the ever-changing population-based needs of the modern student cohort to insure they are able to effectively work with vulnerable populations of children (NASW, 2015). Social work practitioners are the scaffolding with which society can build up its most vulnerable populations, and the key to maintaining and enhancing the overall wellbeing of the young LGBTQ child population. School social workers foster equal access to education for all students, with a focus on disenfranchised and marginalized individuals in social institutions (Pack & Brown, 2017).

It has been mentioned previously; however, is noteworthy enough to mention again, that social workers are cited as the allied mental health professionals that provide the most specific supports to LGBTQ individuals in the U.S. (Craig et al., 2016). Ali and

Barden (2015) explicitly state that social workers must understand and recognize the cyclical nature of the coming out process and the special needs of this vulnerable population of children. School social workers are specially tasked members of the school community who teach adaptive coping strategies to deal with the stigmas of society, stress with coming out and functioning in a heteronormative environment, emotional regulation, and facilitate positive mental health trajectories (Bialer & McIntosh, 2016). As part of the school social worker's job, it is important to understand their own biases, as well as, how to effectively provide culturally competent services to this diverse group of children within the school setting (Ali & Barden, 2015).

Inequalities and injustice are built into modern U.S. school systems (McBride & Schubotz, 2017). Educational facilities specifically reproduce and enforce gender norms, conservative Christian values, and limitations to freedoms of expression through policies and procedures (Roen, 2016). Uniform policies, haircut policies, earring and jewelry policies, absence of LGBTQ identities in school curriculum, and potency of bullying policy enforcement can create facilities that negate or refute positive identity development for nonheterosexual-identifying students (McBride & Schubotz, 2017). The school social worker must combat these inequalities for LGBTQ children to be safe and supported, as part of their home-to-school liaison duties.

Social Workers' Lack of Education Specific to LGBTQ-Issues

Herek and McLemore (2013) posited that social workers are educated to work in a multicultural world of diversity, in the U.S.; however, these higher education facilities are still existing within a historically heterosexist environment. Social workers,

themselves, cite that they are underprepared, by their professional education, to provide services to LGBTQ populations (Craig et al., 2016; Craig et al., 2018; Dentato et al., 2016). If this is the case, underprepared social work students would then become social work practitioners who feel that they do not have adequate expertise to provide culturally competent services to LGBTQ members. Craig et al. (2016) further provide research that social work students, who themselves identify as LGBTQ, report low levels of preparedness to work with LGBTQ populations. Thus, it stands to reason that non-LGBTQ, heterosexual, social workers are extremely underprepared to provide services to a population that they are not a member of and do not understand as an insider. Ali and Barden (2015) discussed the inability for social workers to work effectively with LGBTQ members without education on the specific needs of the population such as understanding the cycle of the coming out process, as well as the ethics involved in working with clients who may not understand their identity yet and are vulnerable to other's swaying them one way or the other. Social workers must comprehend fully the needs of the LGBTQ population to properly be able to provide culturally competent services that are supportive, validating, and understanding towards the specific definition of the individual's own identity.

Summary

Social workers' inherent goal to advocate for marginalized populations and promote fair and equal access to all persons encompasses the need to focus on young LGBTQ children within the U.S. heteronormative school environment. Social workers are on the frontlines of the efforts to enhance the overall wellbeing of all persons within a

society. It is imperative for social work practitioners to implement policies and practices to facilitate better treatment of these young LGBTQ populations within the U.S. educational system (Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013; Craig et al., 2016; Craig et al., 2018; Dentato et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2015).

Recent advancements in societal acceptance of LGBTQ individuals in the United States, such as marriage equality, have shown improvements in many areas of support and allyship which have created spaces of openness and tolerance; however, the overall heteronormative stance of society still plagues many young LGBTQ children every day (Lannutti, 2018; Seelman et al., 2015). School social workers as an identified significant support figure on educational campuses must to be able to address the needs of this vulnerable population (Ali & Barden, 2015). The pervasive negative and positive factors contributing to the health and well-being of young LGBTQ children should be recognized and considered when establishing, enacting, and interpreting policies on the school level. The school social worker as an integral, specially positioned member of the school staff needs to be highly visible as an ally for this population to ensure diversity exposure and acceptance is not only talked about, but also entrenched in the culture of the school, home, and community where they are employed (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018). Section 2 will follow to describe the research design and data collection to answer the question posed for this study, including subheadings regarding participant selection and recruiting, methodology, and ethical procedures.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to explore the perceived barriers school social workers may encounter when providing services to young LGBTQ children in elementary and middle schools in a southeast Louisiana school district. The research question was as follows:

What are the perceived barriers school social workers experience when providing services to young LGBTQ children in elementary and middle school in a southeast Louisiana school district?

In Section 2, I present the research design and methodology to answer the question regarding perceived barriers of school social workers when providing services to young LGBTQ children. Section 2 includes descriptions of the data analysis, interview protocol, and ethical procedures to safeguard participants and data. Section 2 also addresses other sources of data and their applicability to this study.

Research Design

The problem is that although social workers are trained to work in a multicultural world, there are systematic issues that thwart their ability to provide school social work services that adequately meet the specific support needs of young LGBTQ children, especially within the elementary and middle school setting. In this study, I sought to understand the perceived barriers that school social workers may view as possibly precluding them from being able to provide adequate, culturally competent services to this especially vulnerable group of children to increase the safety and support needed on their school campuses. Data on the overall adverse effects on LGBTQ children's' health

and wellbeing are amply documented in the literary lineage. LGBTQ students in high school and beyond have also been documented more thoroughly, with many studies focused on GSAs on these campuses. However, for the elementary and middle school age range, there is little to no recognition or service provision discussion present. The misalignment of social workers being educated for providing services in the multicultural world, paralleled by a lack of adequately meeting the culturally competent needs for younger, elementary and middle school LGBTQ children, prompts the current phenomenon of interest to explore the perceived barriers that may be leading to an inability to provide adequate services.

Due to the lack of knowledge on what perceived barriers might be precluding the ability to provide adequate services specifically with younger LGBTQ children, a semistructured interview, qualitative inquiry was chosen as the most appropriate for this current study. To be consistent with qualitative inquiry approach, the underlying belief of the study is that there are perceived barriers that are inhibiting appropriate service provision to young LGBTQ students. This qualitative semistructured individual interview study was conducted to explore practical knowledge that can help to develop a detailed understating of school social workers' perceptions and variations of viewpoints, and how these perceptions may be precluding adequate culturally competent service provision (see Patton, 2015). The research approach chosen aligned with my problem statement, purpose statement, and methodology chosen as part of this qualitative exploration. Qualitative inquiry was used through this semistructured interview study to allow an exploration of practical knowledge that can help to develop a detailed understanding of

school social workers' perceptions and variations of perceptions, and how these perceptions may be precluding culturally competent service provision (see Patton, 2015).

Methodology

Data Collection

This study included six participants who are current school social workers, working in a southeast Louisiana elementary or middle school setting. Semistructured interviews with an individual interview question guide including 15 questions and subsequent probes were used to obtain data from participants to determine what they perceived as barriers to providing services to young LGBTQ children in the school setting (see Appendix). According to Kallio et al. (2016), a semistructured qualitative interview is a purposeful conversation that uses a predetermined set of questions arranged in an interview guide, based on previous knowledge gathered by the researcher, with improvised use of follow-up probes, as needed, to cover the main topics of the study.

The predetermined questions in the interview guide are used to help facilitate the semistructured interview to ensure that each interviewee's data are collected on similar topics while allowing an in-depth understanding of the participant's own reality with the phenomenon in question (Bearman, 2019; Kallio et al., 2016). To gain a greater understanding of this phenomenon, semistructured interviews were chosen to help understand how school social workers experience and understand their own practice with young LGBTQ students. To gather as much data as possible from each participant, individual interviews allowed me to examine each participant's view of the perceived barriers when providing services with young LGBTQ children in their respective middle

school or elementary school settings, as well as through their clinical experience (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

The individual, semistructured interviews were audiotaped using a digital audio recorder to ensure all information gathered was verbatim from the participant. The timeframe for the individual interviews was between 90 minutes to 2 hours to allow time for the preplanned interview questions from the interview guide, follow-up probes as needed, and as much time as each participant needed to explore and discuss their answers in this one-time interview. The individual interviews began with me describing the purposes of the qualitative study, reviewing and ensuring the participant understood the informed consent and the research procedures, and ensuring the participants understood the voluntary nature of the interview and their ability to remove consent and end the interview at any time during the study. I also discussed the follow-up requirements for the participant, which included participants receiving the verbatim transcript being emailed to them so that they could read over it, agree with it, and clarify anything they wished to clarify, taking no longer than 30 minutes of their time. Demographic information was not sought or inquired about directly in the interview protocol as each participant who met the study criteria was interviewed as an effort to maintain confidentiality of the participants in this specific population.

The inclusion criteria for the study sample included school social workers who worked in a southeast Louisiana school district on an elementary or middle school campus. Social workers who work with children but are not employed by the school

system and school social workers who work with only high school populations were excluded from this current study as it was beyond my scope and purpose.

I used gathered data from the individual interview question guide, journal entries, and analytic memos. Reflexive journaling was conducted throughout the qualitative study process. From literature review research to the development of the purpose and problem to the creation of the interview protocol to the final data collection and analysis, I kept a journal of the process of how the research developed, mini milestone successes, and thoughts on ways to problem solve and continue to evolve the study. Journals were created using process notes, written text, and video journaling techniques. Analytic memos were created throughout the process of data analysis to develop ideas further and keep track of thoughts regarding the process of coding and categorizing. All of these data were maintained throughout the course of the study to add further insights, details, background, and data to the final product along with interview data collected from participants.

Participants

I conducted semistructured interviews with six school social workers who met the study criteria, including (a) currently working as a school social worker in southeast Louisiana, (b) working in an elementary or middle school setting, (c) working for a school district, (d) being willing and able to participate in a qualitative semistructured interview for approximately 90 minutes to 2 hours, (e) agreeing to follow-up requirements of the study to review the transcript for accuracy and clarity, which took no more than 30 minutes of the participant's time, (f) voluntarily agreeing to review and

consent to the informed consent statement, and (g) agreeing to be audiotaped during the semistructured individual interview. I recognized that the many different school districts, charter schools, and Catholic schools in southeast Louisiana hire mental health professionals in various different ways. For that reason, participant inclusion criteria also included the need to be employed by a district school location. Schools that contract their social workers were also excluded as these school social workers may work for agencies that perform different tasks than social workers hired by the school district.

Participant Sampling

Nonprobability, purposive sampling was chosen to specifically select participants who have experience with the target population, were willing and able to participate, and were informed on the needs of the school social work population in regards to the phenomenon being studied (see Hartwell, Serovich, Reed, Boisvert, & Falbo, 2017; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Purposive sampling was used to specifically select a homogenous sample of individuals based on particular characteristics, working within an elementary or middle school setting in southeast Louisiana as part of their district faculty, to best answer the research question (see Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The school social workers selected were all from the geographic area of southeast Louisiana, which is located in the southern region of the United States. The participants were not all chosen from one school district, and the region selected for the study population included a purposefully wide generalized area of school districts to protect the confidentiality of the study participants. Participants selected for this study were purposively sampled and sourced from online published data on school districts' websites. An invitation email was

sent with my contact information to determine if the school social worker was willing to participate in the study. Following the invitation email, a copy of the informed consent was sent to each participant who agreed to be a part of the study. The individual semistructured interviews were then conducted based on the participants' availability in a location that allowed for privacy. No compensation or direct benefit was provided for participation in this study.

Due to the nature of the study and the study population chosen, social desirability and familiarity with me were specifically monitored throughout this study. Social desirability was monitored within this study as human nature leads to the bias of wanting to presenting oneself in a positive light when being recorded in a one-on-one interview under audio recording, especially in regards to discussing social norms (see Larson, 2018). To alleviate this bias, I discussed confidentiality assurances multiple times during recruitment and during the interview, as well as allowed space for the participant to answer freely and provided enough time and follow-up probes to gain a rich and detailed answer for each question (see Larson, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Due to my positionality, being from a similar background and possibly working closely with the participants who chose to participate in the study, participant recruitment was conducted through low-pressure communications via email. Participants were informed in the consent that choice of nonparticipation would not affect any prior or future relationships, and boundaries were maintained throughout recruitment, interview, and data collection to ensure the voluntary nature of the study and me functioning as solely researcher and not

that of colleague, friend, or peer within the study (see Johnson, Adkins, & Chauvin, 2020).

Instrumentation

Interviewing is at the heart of the relational approach employed by qualitative inquiry (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Interviews allow researchers to understand how others experience and make sense of their unique reality (Seidman, 2012). Using an individual interview guide, I was able to achieve rich data through open-ended questions aimed at generating responses from participants that were detailed, unique to themselves and their practice, and reflective of the interviewee's personal opinions on the barriers they view in working with this specific population in the elementary and middle school setting (Kallio et al., 2016).

Due to the pervasiveness of heteronormativity in the United States, LGBTQ issues are not often recognized by many individuals. Recent years have seen progress regarding more open and accepting sectors of society; however, generally speaking, LGBTQ members are still marginalized, discriminated against, left voiceless and powerless, and oppressed daily. Research regarding this phenomenon includes many similar topics such as discrimination, lack of services, increased risk of health and well-being risk factors, and need for advocacy and support (Moe et al., 2015; Palmer & Greytak, 2017; Wagaman et al., 2018). Unique findings include the ability to support and foster resilience in young LGBTQ members, including having a knowledgeable professional on a school campus that can specifically meet this population's unique needs (Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013; Kosciw et al., 2015). Finally, specific service provision to

young LGBTQ child populations includes literature regarding the effects of living within a heteronormative society (Kosciw et al., 2012; Rutherford, McIntyre, Daley, & Ross, 2012; Savage & Schanding, 2013; Wagaman et al., 2018). As mentioned above, these topics were covered in the created individual interview questions guide to ensure that data provided enough evidence for the study's exploration of this phenomenon (see Appendix).

The individual interview guide questions were rooted in the chosen theoretical framework of critical theory and included concepts from normative theory, heteronormativity, and democracy. Critical theory is based on the belief that groups of people are oppressed in society and that they need to be empowered. Further, this study supported the rejection of the status quo by questioning all disciplines to promote emancipation for those who lack power in a democratic society (see Stahl et al., 2014). Within this heteronormative society, educational facilities indoctrinate and enforce heterosexuality, and due to this, young LGBTQ students lack needed services to recognize, support, advocate for, and provide open acceptance to their gender identities or sexual orientations (Wagaman et al., 2018). Questions included in the interview protocol access social workers' knowledge, training, and perceptions of LGBTQ issues. The interview questions also examined the role of the school social worker in young LGBTQ students' education, how they viewed heteronormativity, and what they perceived as barriers to providing specific support to young LGBTQ students (see Appendix). Questioning the school social worker's service provision is part of a larger

effort to recognize and respond to the unique needs of LGBTQ students within the heteronormative school setting.

I kept track of key terms, noteworthy responses, and discussions that prompted more exploration in a notebook throughout data collection to supplement the verbatim audio-recorded interviews. Saturation was examined throughout this process of data collection. Saturation is when the research yields no novel ideas, information, or themes that can be deduced from the data (Burkholder, Cox, & Crawford, 2016; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Ravitch and Carl (2016) discussed saturation as the point when interviewees begin to make redundant statements, and no new cases need to be added as they would not provide new understanding regarding the phenomena of the study. Data collection goals were considered to be met when enough information was gathered on each of the main topics to begin to elicit similar responses from multiple participants such that no new data was being collected (Cyr, 2015; Guest et al., 2006).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was achieved for this individual semistructured interview, qualitative inquiry to make sense of the data through the selected critical theory lens through content analysis (see Meyer & Avery, 2009; Patton, 2015). The participants' data were audio-recorded and then transcribed, verbatim, solely by the researcher, and entered into an Excel spreadsheet for coding, analysis, and synthesis. I used content analysis by selecting keywords and phrases and manually entering them into the Excel spreadsheet. Content analysis derives the meaning of transcribed text by delineating patterns and themes within the data (Patton, 2015; Saladaña, 2016; Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, &

Snelgrove, 2016). Inductive content analysis was chosen to be especially appropriate for this exploratory study due to the research question which sought to find, identify, and categorize the perceived barriers that school social workers experienced when providing specific support services to young LGBTQ children, from their point of view (see Patton, 2015; Smith & Firth, 2011).

To inductively create knowledge regarding the perceived barriers of school social workers' provision of services to young LGBTQ children, my first cycle of data coding included exploratory and In-Vivo coding techniques to initially summarize the data into manageable process codes and initial codes (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saladaña, 2016). The second cycle of data analysis included pattern coding to group, summarize, and synthesize the data's meaning based on these patterns and relationships between codes (see Saladaña, 2016). Lastly, themes were identified, and all relevant pieces of data were used to deduce the main product that answers the study's research question. A codebook was created with identified codes, categories, and emerging themes to maintain and preserve data throughout the coding and analysis process. A running analytic memo including reflections on the coding process; patterns, categories, themes that emerged, and further questioning and line of thinking were developed progressively throughout the coding process (see Saladaña, 2016).

Establishing Trustworthiness

The quality of qualitative research is judged by its ability to show trustworthiness or rigor to prove that the study is worthy of consideration for a scholarly audience (Connelly, 2016; Shenton, 2004). To ensure transparency and credibility, researchers

must demonstrate important ways the research was conceived, conducted, gathered, analyzed, and contextualized (Shenton, 2004). Lincoln and Guba's (1985) seminal work discussed the importance of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability for qualitative studies to show trustworthiness, which parallels the concepts of validity for more traditionally accepted quantitative approaches. Each of these concepts of trustworthiness was examined throughout the research process.

Credibility. Credibility is the plausibility of internal consistency between the research findings and the participants under study (Hadi & Closs, 2016). Through the use of triangulation, the current study used data collection and analysis interpretation based on multiple sources (Baillie, 2015; Burkholder et al., 2016). Through systematic fieldwork, with reflexive journaling, the current study ensured the credibility of data collection and the research process (Patton, 2015; Toma, 2011). Documenting my own positionality, as the researcher, and examination of research efforts were discussed and reviewed with assigned committee members to monitor bias. Through this examination, I also explored and discussed my own inherent biases and examined question creation, as well as coding and analysis efforts with assigned committee members to maintain a stance of integrity in data collection and dissemination of findings (see Patton, 2015; Spall, 1998).

Transferability. The second criterion that was used to evaluate the trustworthiness of this qualitative study is fittingness or transferability. Transferability is similar to generalizability as it examines the ability to accurately apply the findings within the context or population under study (Connelly, 2016; Shenton, 2004).

Transferability is dissimilar to generalizability in that the onus is on research consumers to make a judgment regarding if the findings may transfer based on the study's ability to present sufficient information on the process, participants, context, and researcher-as-instrument bias (Marrow, 1993). Using thick description, I described in detail the procedures, context, role of the researcher, and participants to permit transparency so that readers can determine applicability to their specific sites and personal practice (Meyer & Willis, 2018).

Dependability. Dependability strategies included documentation of the naturally occurring phenomena within the study's contextual boundaries (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Personal notes were documented throughout the process, reflexively journaling my thoughts, insights gathered, and further documents needed to be examined to answer the research question. This study used a created interview protocol based on the literary lineage of research on LGBTQ issues and modern educational facilities. The interview protocol has not been previously validated; thus, the data's dependability would benefit from empirically derived evidence (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Confirmability. Similar to dependability strategies, confirmability ensured that I could demonstrate how findings were obtained, observed, gathered, analyzed, and recorded to transparently show that the findings do not merely represent personal biases and beliefs (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Shenton, 2004). Data were transcribed verbatim from participant audio-recorded interviews to preserve the qualitative interviews. My beliefs and biases were also documented throughout this research process for a scholarly consumer to scrutinize with the findings. Throughout the research, reflexivity was

specifically used to critically evaluate this myself as the primary instrument of this qualitative inquiry (see Burkholder et al., 2016; Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Ethical Procedures

This DSW qualitative study aimed to explore the perceived barriers of school social workers working in elementary or middle school settings in southeast Louisiana when providing services to young LGBTQ children. Data collection and contact with purposefully sampled participants did not begin until IRB approval was given (IRB of Walden University approval number: 08-14-20-0980501 on August 14th, 2020). Each participant was given ample time to make decisions through low-pressure email communication, with no deadlines attached to reduce any pressure from a sense of urgency. Participants were treated with professional courtesy and respect and allowed to determine if they wished to participate in this study independently, and boundaries between researcher and participant were maintained throughout with constant reminders of the study's voluntary nature.

Talking about a vulnerable population can sometimes leave people feeling uneasy, especially if they feel personally attacked in recognizing they may not be entirely unbiased. LGBTQ issues often are intertwined with faith, religious backgrounds, and morality. Social workers have personal opinions, biases, and feelings about people they come into contact with, and the questions that were asked in this study were examined to ensure that they did not open up uneasy feelings, anger, and misunderstandings. To safeguard participants and be fully committed to the research to gather accurate reflection of the participants' perceived barriers, I strictly enforced boundaries while balancing a

rapport with the purposefully chosen participant. Voluntarism was also ensured within the informed consent (see Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Guaranteeing participants had the freedom to withdraw at any time during the study, and transparently informing them of the study's true purpose occurred before data collection and as a reminder at the end of the interview (see Negozwana, 2018).

The informed consent was provided to each participant to review. The informed consent outlined confidentiality, described what was required of the participant during the study, timeframes regarding follow-up, and listed any known risks, inconveniences, or discomfort. Confidentiality measures that were taken throughout this study included: (a) use of a pseudonym for each participant during data collection, transcription, analysis, and discussion in the research study; (b) participants were asked to refrain from naming themselves, their specific work location/school/district, and any identifying information beyond questions covered by the individual interview guide were not asked; and (c) no directly identifying demographic data was purposefully asked for during the interviews to protect the anonymity of the individual participant in this specific geographic location. Measures for any unlikely events, such as psychological discomfort or any unanticipated disclosures regarding abuse, were discussed in the informed consent with specific follow-up measures that I would have taken. Each participant reviewed the informed consent, and informed understanding was achieved by email response, from the participant, with the words "I consent." Informed consent was required before any data collection occurred. The participants were told to maintain a copy of the informed consent for their records. During the interview, participants were told that they would receive their

verbatim transcripts of the interview to review, for clarity, and an executive summary of the study after completion to conduct the member checking process. Participants were also assured they could obtain a copy of the audio recording or transcripts upon request. Data gathered through audio-recorded interviews, as well as verbatim transcription, are stored and maintained solely by the researcher on a password protected computer with all participant names and identifying information removed and stored in a separate document that is password-protected itself.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceived barriers of school social workers when providing services to young LGBTQ children in elementary and middle schools in a southeast Louisiana school district. The research question for this study is, "What are the perceived barriers school social workers experience when providing culturally competent services to young LGBTQ children in elementary and middle school settings in a southeast Louisiana school district?" The specific problem that prompted this research is, although social workers are trained to work in a multicultural world, there is a deficiency of culturally competent school-social work service provision that adequately meets the specific support needs of young LGBTQ children, especially within the elementary and middle school setting (see Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013; Garbers et al., 2018). Data were collected via six school social workers employed by a school district in southeast Louisiana elementary or middle school settings. Data gathered was coded using inductive analysis to determine categories and

themes to answer the study's research question. Section 3 will follow to present the findings as well as themes that emerged, with examples from verbatim participant quotes.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to explore the perceived barriers school social workers may encounter when providing services to young LGBTQ children in elementary and middle schools in a southeast Louisiana school district. The research question is as follows:

What are the perceived barriers school social workers experience when providing services to young LGBTQ children in elementary and middle school in a southeast Louisiana school district?

Qualitative inquiry was conducted using a semistructured individual interview question guide with six purposefully selected school social workers who are employed by school districts in Southeast Louisiana currently working in an elementary or middle school setting. Nonprobability, purposive sampling was chosen to specifically select participants who had experience with the target population, were willing and able to participate, and were informed on the needs of the school social work population in regards to the phenomenon being studied (see Hartwell et al., 2017; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Inductive content analysis was chosen to be especially appropriate for this exploratory study due to the research question specifically seeking to find, identify, and categorize the perceived barriers that school social workers experience when providing culturally competent services to young LGBTQ children from their point of view (see Patton, 2015; Smith & Firth, 2011). The data from participants were audio-recorded and then transcribed, verbatim, solely by me and entered into an Excel spreadsheet for coding, analysis, and synthesis. Codes were pulled from textual data and maintained in a

codebook to determine main concepts and delineate patterns in data. Categories were then deduced to summarize and synthesize the meaning of the data based on these patterns and relationships between codes. Lastly, themes were identified from all relevant pieces of data to deduce the main product that answers the study's research question (see Patton, 2015; Smith & Firth, 2011).

In Section 3, I present the data collection and analysis process and techniques that were used to answer this research question. Section 3 includes a description of the findings along with themes that emerged from the data and a summary of findings.

Data Analysis Techniques

Upon approval by the IRB of Walden University on August 14th, 2020, I began recruitment of school social workers who were employed by an elementary or middle school district in Southeast Louisiana. Twelve purposely sampled school social workers were invited to participate in this study via email. Six participants who met inclusion criteria responded and agreed to participate and subsequently consented to participate after reviewing the informed consent form, which was sent to them via email following agreement to participate. These six participants, all of whom were currently working in a school setting that included both elementary and middle school students, were interviewed via a semistructured qualitative interview format in August of 2020, following approval by the IRB. Each participant's individual interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded and conducted via phone in an effort to maintain social distancing guidelines and comfortability of participation due to

the national health crisis and inability to meet face-to-face. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect confidentiality during data collection and analysis.

At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the informed consent information that each participant had previously consented to; discussed the purpose of the interview study; explained that the interview would take no longer than 90 minutes to 2 hours of their time; discussed the follow-up email they would receive with the verbatim transcription for them to review and clarify anything they should need, which took no longer than 30 minutes of their time; and asked participants if they had any questions before the interview began. During the interview, an audio-recorder was unobstructed and placed next to the phone to gather all information presented by the participant verbatim. I also had a digital clock to monitor time and a notebook that I used to take notes on important topics or responses to keep track of to ask follow-up questions or to be used during data coding and analysis.

Open-ended questions, with follow-up questions as needed to gain more clarity from participant answers, were used to seek understanding of the participant's experiences in working with young LGBTQ children, determine the barriers they perceived in working with this population, note the level of education and understanding they had for this population prior to field work and over past few years through continuing education unit (CEU) trainings, and note specific barriers they perceived in the elementary and middle school setting (see Allen & Solomon, 2016; Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Throughout the interviews, I summarized important points that participants made to ensure accuracy and clarity. No participant made any indication that

they felt uncomfortable throughout their interviews, and all participants expanded on each question in important ways, speaking directly from their experiences. At the end of the interview, I asked participants if there was anything that was missed during the interview or if they had any questions, comments, or concerns. I thanked participants and reminded that they would be receiving a follow-up email with the verbatim transcription of the interview that would take no longer than 30 minutes of their time to review for anything that should need to be clarified. No compensation or direct benefit was provided to participants for their voluntary participation in this study.

Through the use of triangulation, I used data collection and analysis interpretation based on multiple sources, using the same set of semistructured interview questions to substantiate and add credibility of internal consistency between research findings and all six participants interviewed for this study (see Baillie, 2015; Burkholder et al., 2016; Hadi & Closs, 2016). After each of the six interviews were conducted, I transcribed the audio-recordings verbatim. The transcripts were solely created, maintained, and coded by me and not seen by any other individuals for this process. Prior to coding, transcripts were sent to participants via email to member check and ensure clarity and accuracy of transcription.

Inductive content analysis was used to analyze the data gathered from the six qualitative, semistructured interviews. Vaismoradi et al. (2016) posited that qualitative research methods are conducted to gather an in-depth, contextually-situated interpretation of the phenomenon of interest through identifying the theme or themes, which are the main product of the data analysis process. Through the process of coding and analyzing, I

conducted an interpretation of the data collected as the main instrument this qualitative exploration. After gathering textual data, the process of coding began with the first-round coding cycle, in which I became familiarized with the data, looking for words or short phrases that signified what was being discussed by the participant (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The second-round coding cycle was used to read and reread the data multiple times and begin to summarize and condense data to be able to analyze what the data are trying to say regarding the perceived barriers of school social workers when working with young LGBTQ children (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saladaña, 2016).

I created a codebook to make sense of the major categories that were being captured in the participant's words. After coding and classifying the data, categories were deduced to summarize and synthesize what the meaning of the data was based on patterns seen in the coding cycles (see Saladaña, 2016). A word or short phrase was assigned to a category of "chunked" data to determine collective codes that were illustrated by the data to consolidate what the actual meaning of the data is, not just what ideas are included in the data (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The codebook created included 72 key codes that were organized into 20 categories that summarized the data and led to five major themes and the most important data that the participants discussed. The themes derived took the emic, descriptive data and explained what the data were saying in regards to the research question, based on my perspective, using an etic approach (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Themes were developed from the data but show the rest of the world what the data mean to the study without scholarly consumers having to read through all of the transcribed data. Five themes were identified: (a) social work education

and understanding, (b) heteronormativity and the school system, (c) beliefs and values, (d) barriers, and (e) positives and what can be done.

In addition to triangulation, which was discussed previously, I used member checking to add credibility to my interpretation of the data. Member checking was conducted by providing participants a copy of their individual transcripts to ask for feedback and check for clarity and accuracy (see Burkholder et al., 2016; Shenton, 2004). Other procedures to increase the trustworthiness of the study included using thick description of study procedures to increase transferability, audit trail, codebook maintenance, reflexive journaling, as well as transparency of the study process from start to finish, and preservation of the interview though verbatim audio-recordings of interviews (see Burkholder et al., 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Reflective journaling was used to document my thoughts, insights gathered, and further research needs throughout the study to add to the dependability (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, negative case analysis was examined as emerging themes of positives were discussed by participants. By discussing these nonbarriers and things that are going well, I was able to give clearer picture of the data and not just the barriers that were sought by the research question (Barusch, Gringeri, & George, 2011). All documentation of this study, including notes, audio-recordings, memos, journals, and drafts, are required to be kept for a minimum of 5 years in accordance with Walden University's IRB.

Limitations

Due to the lack of knowledge on what perceived barriers might be precluding the ability to provide adequate services specifically with younger LGBTQ children, an exploratory, semistructured interview, qualitative inquiry was chosen as most appropriate for this current study (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this study, I focused on school social workers who are currently employed in an elementary or middle school setting in Southeast Louisiana. The sample size of this study was six participants who worked within this large geographic area of this southern state in the United States of America. Although the sample size was small, this study can be used as an educative study exploration for school social workers' perceived barriers when providing services to young LGBTQ students by other social workers in similar urban-area school districts in similar geographic locations. One limitation I noted was the lack of demographic information gathered for comparison beyond the inclusion criteria of being a licensed social worker working in an elementary or middle school setting as a district employed school social worker. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity of participants, demographic information was purposefully not gathered in this study due to the specificities of the geographic location under study; however, it would be beneficial in future studies to examine how years of experience, level of licensure, and/or other factors may further examine the phenomenon of interest.

Findings

The proliferation of bias and prejudicial attitudes towards the LGBTQ community have been studied and empirically recognized throughout modern history. School social

workers, as the school-to-home mental health liaison, have a duty to protect and support vulnerable populations of students (Austin et al., 2019). Research supports the overarching need for the young LGBTQ population as they report a higher risk of suicide, bullying, and harassment, early and problematic drug and alcohol usage, and risky sexual practices (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2019; Palmer & Greytak, 2017). Social workers are trained to work in a multicultural world; however, there are systematic issues that thwart their ability to provide school social work services that adequately meet the specific support needs of young LGBTQ children, especially within the elementary and middle school setting.

This study's sample was composed of six school social workers, currently licensed to practice in the state of Louisiana, working as a school district employee in a southeast Louisiana elementary or middle school. This study sought to understand the school social workers' perceived barriers, who worked within elementary and middle school settings in Southeast Louisiana when providing services to young LGBTQ children. Based on participants' responses, it appears that there is a lack of education across the board for social workers, barriers of administration and teacher understandings, constraints on school social worker’s time, barriers due to the intertwinement of religiosity and politics, parental barriers, and an overall urge for social workers to educate the staff in their school buildings further. Positive findings include social workers recognizing each student's individual needs, the recognition that there are more CEU and training opportunities in the past 5 years, and the expressed belief that younger generations are more accepting and welcoming to all populations.

Themes

Data collection and analysis, following qualitative interviews, revealed five emergent themes including (a) social work education and understanding of heteronormativity, (b) heteronormativity and the school systems, (c) beliefs and values, (d) barriers, and (e) positives and what can be done. The findings better situate an understanding of the perceived barriers of school social workers working in elementary and middle school settings in Southeast Louisiana, as well as positives and potential avenues for growth for the social work field as a whole. Participants were given the pseudonyms of Mary, Angela, Jocelyn, Christina, Shannon, and Steve. All participants were licensed school social workers who worked in an elementary or middle school setting in Southeast Louisiana. Pseudonyms have been assigned to help make sense of the following identified themes, outlined below. Participant quotes are provided, with minor editorial changes for readability, to support each theme.

Theme 1: Social Work Education and Understandings of Heteronormativity

This theme was discussed by participants in regards to (a) education prior to working in the field or past education, (b) CEU training and current education, and (c) understanding of vocabulary and specifics about heteronormativity. In regards to education prior to working in the field, all six participants, out of six, reported that they did not feel that their master's in social work program prepared them adequately to work with the LGBTQ population in general. Mary stated,

> When I was in school, we did not do a whole lot. I mean, we were taught to treat people the same and not bring in your biases and prejudices into your practice.

> But specifically, for the LGBT community, I think we are doing a lot more work around that now. We are doing a better job in keeping the LGBTQ community more inclusive. There are a lot of things now that we are doing that we weren't doing then.

Christina reported the following:

> Um, so I guess not part of my curriculum. I believe there was maybe one class offered in graduate school regarding LGBTQ issues, and it was not a required class, and I didn't take it as an elective…. I definitely think having more classes and having more options and not having it just as an elective and having it as a requirement would have been beneficial.

Steve shared,

> Briefly. I know they were included in some ways, but not at a depth that I could pinpoint in any ways… there probably could have been better focus on gender identity and LGBTQ in general.

Shannon reported,

> Well, that was a long time ago. Honestly, I think it may have been in a class or two, but I don't think it was anything that was memorable, apparently because I don't really remember.

Angela verbalized,

> There was nothing. There was no exposure at all. The track that I was on was health and mental health, and um, so that was a subject that has never been

> addressed. That is a population that has never been considered to be part of the curriculum.

Although all participants shared that they did not remember LGBTQ populations being a focus of their prior education, participants did discuss that there have been more CEU training opportunities available for social workers in the past few months and past few years. For example, Angela remarked,

> What I can say is that over the past couple of months, I have seen more and more LGBTQ specific trainings appear and be offered. But in the past, I have not been exposed to nor saw any information or CEUs that address LGBTQ specifically.

Mary reported the following:

> I think that we have more of a choice now days. There is more now on the LGBTQ population, like when I do the national conventions, they always offer something on the LGBTQ community.

Jocelyn agreed that there are more CEUs offered specifically related to LGBTQ issues in more recent years, citing,

> I don't remember the exact number, but it has definitely become more prominent in the last five years, I would say. I have noticed that within any forum that comes up, that topic is represented in that forum.

Specifically, for this study, the word heteronormativity was explored with the school social work participants to determine what it means to them and their practice. All participants, except one, stated that they were guessing or had not previously heard the word heteronormativity. However, despite saying they were guessing, which leads me to

believe that heteronormativity does not seem to have a mainstream understanding, all participants did accurately guess, with some stating it was due to their practice knowledge and not their formal social work education. Mary guessed the word when the question was presented. She stated the following:

> Um. I would say, just by the word you used. What was it, heteronormativity?...I would say that means like, um, and I'm not sure if I have it correct because I have never heard the word before. But I would say when you think of heterosexual, someone that is being with the opposite sex, you normalize it, and you believe that is true for everyone. I may be off, but um, yeah, that's my guess.

Angela similarly responded that she did not know and had not ever heard the word heteronormativity; however, she guessed,

> I do not know. What it sounds like, if I had to take a guess on what I think it means, is that heterosexuality is the only normal way to live.

Christina, who stated she had heard the word before from a colleague social worker, said that she did not know if she was correct but stated,

> I think that I have heard that word before from a colleague. I guess it's the assumption that all people are heterosexual and that being straight is the only way to be.

Based on the participants' comments regarding the lack of LGBTQ-specific education and training that they felt would have better prepared them to work with all students within an elementary and middle school setting, it seems that current training in social work practice has become more inclusive. However, there is still room to grow so

that all social workers are better prepared to work with diverse populations of individuals. A few participants specifically noted that they felt like the LGBTQ population was excluded from mainstream education and all recommended that social work schools should include LGBTQ issues as part of the education that all social workers receive as part of their required coursework. The NASW Code of Ethics (2017) mission is to ensure equality and social justice advocacy is provided to all people in society, specifically including those who are most vulnerable; thus, it is imperative that social work practitioners are being prepared by their educational institutions to meet the needs of these extremely vulnerable young LGBTQ children.

Theme 2: Heteronormativity and the School System

Following the discussion of heteronormativity and the realization that this word may not be mainstream for the majority of social workers, I provided an example of heteronormativity to open discussion about how this may be seen in the elementary and middle school setting. Elementary and middle school campuses in the United States are tasked with the legal, ethical, and moral obligation to provide equal access to education and personal safety for every student in society (Moe et al., 2015). Norms taught to young children during their formative years have a major factor in their lifelong values and beliefs (Seelman et al., 2015). Regarding heteronormativity and the school system, barriers fell into the categories of (a) societal structures and impacts on children, (b) younger children lacking the words to express themselves but understanding that they are different than their peers, (c) administrator education, and (d) school policies and procedures that allow heteronormativity to thrive. All participants discussed how societal

norms of heteronormativity are commonplace in elementary and middle school settings. The majority of participants specifically exampled things that they have seen, heard, or could imaging seeing in PreK and Kindergarten classrooms. Mary reported the following:

> You know when you look at playing house, schools teach children how to play. Like when you look at Kindergarten or PreK students, they learn different things as far as what is perceived as normal behavior and what is not okay. They learn that girls should play with dolls, and boys should play with trucks. So, I think as a society, we definitely enforce it, and it shows up in our schools.

Angela also discussed an example from preschool saying,

> If you watch kids playing and if a little boy goes over, especially back in preschool grades, if a little boy wants to go over to play with a baby doll, the teacher may take the doll and usher the kid over to where the cars and trucks are.

Shannon took it one step further to explain that teachers are not trained in diversity and multicultural understanding as much as a social worker with the following statement:

> Teachers do not have the same training that social workers have so they make comments such as “man of the house” or “knight in shining armor” that is just something that they do naturally in the classroom setting… I think a lot of older people think that students, especially younger students do not deal with the issue regarding their gender identity or sexual orientation at all, or they typically just believe that they are confused. That is a misconception that I think is kind of taught when we were in school, or at least when I was in school. And it is a

> misconception that I think needs to be changed because it is an issue that our young students deal with on a regular basis.

Steve further discussed teachers' role in recapitulating gender-stereotypical behaviors that enforce heteronormativity within the classroom setting reporting,

> In younger children, sometimes, a teacher may look at a boy and a girl who are good friends and make comments that are inappropriate about how they are boyfriend and girlfriend or that they are dating. And then heteronormativity plays into bullying because anything that is not the norm or doesn't go with the norm will be looked down upon and shunned by others.

Heteronormativity within the classroom can make it difficult for students to understand themselves and develop their own sense of identity. Participants discussed younger children specifically as having more difficulty as they are not yet able to express themselves verbally fully. Although they do not have the words to express what they are feeling or name their identity, the participants discussed that they understand that they are different due to not fitting into heteronormative societal outlooks. In regards to younger students being able to identify themselves, Steve said the following:

> I think that there is no absolute. There is always going to be a small percentage who will identify that they are different than the normative and be able to pinpoint what that difference is. But I think there is a larger population who would have never thought about that difference exactly. Like a lot of small children don't pay attention to attraction in that form yet. Or even they may just notice that they are interested in different things, like different toys or fashion. But there are not the

> words or consistency yet because children are just trying to figure out their identity in a longitudinal stance.

Mary reported,

> I think [younger children] may not be able to put a name on it… I think that they do know that they like to dress a certain way or what have you. I think it can cause them great stress and causes them to isolate because they are feeling different and not feeling like everyone else. And it can open up a whole lot about depression or suicide because they feel different and they don't feel like they are part of the norm because we do not make them feel like they are part of the norm, and everyone should feel that they are valued.

Angela said,

> I don't think that they have the wording, the terms for it, I think that if they are more exposed to what this means. Just like when we are working with children and teaching them how to label their feelings, then they would more so be able to identify and speak to what they are feeling. I think they would be able to identify because they don't have the language for it yet. I think that we need to go into the classrooms and, just like [other Social Emotional Learning] programs, where we go in and discuss how we need to be kind to everyone and be respectful to everyone. And not so much concentrate on a gender or a pronoun [especially for the younger children] and just concentrate on people. See people as people. And so, it begins at the top using psychoeducation [with administration] and working our way down to the students.

Multiple participants discussed the need for social workers to educate and advocate to administrators. Specifically, more than one participant discussed administration, at the school level, as a barrier and a needed target area for social workers to focus their advocacy for young LGBTQ children. Mary reported the following:

> Administration is the key. You know if you have administrator buy-in and an admin that is open and accepting and receptive to what you bring to the table as a school social worker, then the climate is better. Sometimes you have administrators that have been in the system for years, and that affects the climate in a lot of our major cities across the United States.

Christina stated,

> I think probably the biggest obstacle for the social worker is acceptance from administration. Like they may not feel like they want to do that at the school, how will the parents feel. So, I think getting the administration on board, working with the parents and getting the parents on board, and knowing that this is okay, especially for elementary kids, because people may feel like they are so young.

Along with targeting advocacy towards administration, participants discussed school policies and procedures as needed to be examined as they further enforce heteronormativity on young children. Mary stated the following:

> As far as the educational system, I think we could definitely do a better job at [making our policies and procedures more accepting]. When you have decision makers at the forefront of making policies and procedures of the school, and when LGBTQ issues aren't considered, then you have people come in with their

> preconceived notions and create the climate based on their beliefs because it is not spelled out in the policies.

Angela referenced the following:

> Certain policies and procedures are for boys, and certain policies and procedures are for girls. Whether it be like earrings, or things like jewelry, where girls are allowed to wear earrings and boys are not. Boys are given different options than girls.

Steve verbalized,

> The dress codes can be very heteronormative and very whitewashed. In terms of how you can and cannot wear you hear, who can and cannot wear jewelry. The idea of what a person should wear, even in public school, you know, why can't a boy wear a dress?

Although all participants discussed LGBTQ issues being more prominent and a more general overall greater acceptance for LGBTQ issues, heteronormativity within the school system is still ever-present across multiple sources such as administrator acceptance and schools' policies and procedures. One participant stated that she believed high school settings were more accepting and open with programming that is pro-LGBTQ; however, she had never seen this same work being done on an elementary or middle school campus. A few participants explored school social workers having to work with the young LGBTQ student themselves and having to work with administration, teachers, and policymakers to truly make a difference on the pupil-level.

Theme 3: Beliefs and Values

Beliefs and values were a theme that encompassed topics including (a) personal and professional beliefs and role development and (b) cultural competency and values. Participants discussed personal beliefs and their beliefs about the biggest struggle for LGBTQ students in the elementary and middle school setting, including bullying, ostracizing, lack of support, lack of understanding, and stereotyping. Their professional beliefs blended into cultural competency as it pertained to work with this specific vulnerable population. Participants also discussed the need for children to be educated and to bring normalization to the topic of LGBTQ so that children are exposed to diversity, as well as educating teachers to help them be more mindful of heteronormativity and how to include all children better regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Angela expressed that she believed students mostly struggle with,

> Feeling accepted. Being ostracized and feeling that "I'm different" and being afraid to come out. I think more kids these days, like generation X children, they are more accepting. Like when I was in school people knew we had gay people, but it was something you didn't say. And I think these days more kids are more open and accepting and children can come out and say "look this is who I am, take it or leave it." So, I think, as a society, we have gotten better about it but we still have a lot of youth who are still scared and don't feel accepted.

Bringing normalization to LGBTQ issues was also discussed by Shannon, who stated the following:

> I think it would be a positive to have materials or books including LGBTQ topics because we have to learn. If you aren't provided with the information, then you just don't know.

Mary expressed,

> I think having discussion and educating, making sure school policies and procedures, and the school culture and climate is inclusive of everyone. So, I think the role of the school social worker is educating staff, and when you see something, say something. Though we are discussing LGBTQ issues, being a social worker, we all have to be honest because we all have our own biases and we all grew up differently. We need to be able to put ourselves in a space and be able to recognize and check our own biases... As social workers you can do so much harm if you are not aware of what it takes to work with a specific population.

Steve stated,

> I think cultural competency with LGBTQ children looks like the tenants of acceptance and nonjudgmental. Because in those cases we are there to help someone find themselves or help them with identification of identity... I think, especially in an elementary school, heteronormativity is present and we need to not always assume those stereotypes and need to do more to prevent the heteronormative views. [Social workers] also, need to work with teachers who may purposefully or accidentally limit the amount of available items for all genders, during play time, and to not make judgements on what toys the kid

> should be able to play with. And to point out that those judgements can lead to the students internalizing what is deemed right or wrong.

Angela also discussed cultural competency in regards to working with young LGBTQ students stating the following:

> I think the biggest thing, and this is with all populations, is being open minded. Because if I bring my beliefs into certain situations, then I may not be open minded or accepting of a certain person.

Participants discussed LGBTQ students increased suicidal ideation rates, bullying, and overall fear of school not being a safe space for all. Two participants discussed the misunderstanding of sexual orientation and sexual attraction, citing that younger students may not have sexual attraction feelings yet, which leads others to believe that they cannot accurately identify their sexual orientation at such a young age. The NASW Code of Ethics (2017) discusses the value of competence as social workers' inherent need to ensure that they can work with all groups of individuals within their educational training boundaries. Social workers should ensure that they are culturally aware and understand the client's social diversity within their service provision (see NASW, 2017). Each participant discussed their belief that social work schools do not fully educate a practitioner to be competent in working with the LGBTQ population specifically, so there is an educational barrier being met through ongoing CEU training and practice knowledge. School social workers, per the participants, are knowledgeable on the unique barriers for young LGBTQ students, understand culturally competent practice in general, and have the knowledge to be able to teach other educators at their school settings to be

more open and accepting of all students regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation.

Theme 4: Barriers

Barriers were the specific source of knowledge sought after within this DSW project. As a reminder, the research question for this study was: What are the perceived barriers school social workers experience when providing services to young LGBTQ children in elementary and middle school settings in a southeast Louisiana school district? Many noteworthy barriers were discussed by participants, including (a) time; (b) lack of education for social workers, teachers, and administration; (c) heteronormativity built into the school system; (d) administration, teachers, and parental barriers; (e) children's understanding and ability to express themselves; (f) policies and procedures; (g) geographic location; and (h) religiosity and policies. Time was the first barrier that became prevalently described by all school social work participants. Shannon reported,

> Time is a factor in providing services to all of our children because there is never enough time in a day. And LGBTQ students need extra support. So, I think that time is a huge barrier.

Steve commented,

> Time is the biggest barrier. School social workers are stretched very thin with all of the things that they have to do and the required provisions of therapy including working with children that have IEPs [which require] you have to do specific work.

Angela stated the following:

> I mean there are a million different roles that we play in our setting. We have to, of course, be the voice for the student sometimes. And we have to, especially with administration, because you know, administration often works on a business model and they are not trained the same way as a social worker so they may approach things from a different perspective than how we would. So, working with administration is really important. Also working with the stakeholders and the ones that make policies. As far as the student, you know, helping them get their voice in certain situations, helping them verbalize their needs, what they want, what they can and cannot do. Things like that to help them to be their own advocates and helping them to empower themselves.

Lack of education was discussed across the board. Lack of education specifically for social workers prior to working in the field, lack of education for administration on how to properly ensure students are all treated equally through policies and procedures, and lack of understanding and education available to teachers. Angela reported,

> The general thought in people's mind is heteronormativity, and until they are educated on it, they can't begin to do something different. So, if they aren't educated, then nothing will change. I think that one of the main things is that we should be able to create a safe, affirming space. We should be protecting LGBTQ students from bullying, but we should also be able to educate, not only them but also school-wide. Like when we start school each year, it is mandatory that we talk about bullying, it's mandatory that we talk about suicide, they have a whole list of things that are mandatory to teach and learn about, and I think that again,

> we are excluding LGBTQ students' realities. We are excluding not a topic but a group of individuals. And I think that it needs to be discussed because they need to be protected as well as acknowledged through educating teachers and staff.

Shannon stated the following:

> Teachers do not have the same training that social workers have, so they make comments such as "man of the house" or "knight in shining armor" that is just something that they do naturally in the classroom setting. Working with the teacher is really the most important to train them on how to handle certain situations. Like if a student doesn't want to be identified as "he," then I would work with that teacher to help them so that the student feels supported, and the teacher doesn't just view it as strange or awkward. Working with and educating the teacher is just as important so that they know how to handle and be open to things like that.

Mary said,

> As a school social worker, you are there to advocate. So, I think that is our role to make sure the information is out there as a school social worker, helping staff recognize their own biases and what their core values are and making sure they check those things at the door.

Participants discussed an overall lack of knowledge around LGBTQ issues for staff, administration, and social workers. Participants also remarked about how they felt heteronormativity is built into the educational teaching at modern-day school settings. Specifically, four of the six interviewees discussed preschool age and younger grade

students being specifically indoctrinated with gender-normative behaviors and societal beliefs of heteronormativity. Regarding the barrier of heteronormativity being built into the school system, participants discussed how this created a lack of safety for students and how administration, teachers, and parents enforce it. Mary stated,

> We [as a society] have been already wired to think that heteronormativity is normal, and then when you do not identify as a heterosexual you then think something is wrong with you.

Christina remarked,

> Like principals may not know it may be bad to say boys can't wear earrings, but girls can. But I think, its mainly about educating and making people aware of the issues is our main job. I feel like you can have a million safe places in the school, but if you have that one place that is not safe, that is what students feel and what they remember.

Mary discussed the following:

> You may have a teacher that doesn't understand what it means to be open and accepting to all students and may say things or do things that may seem normal to that person, and the majority of the classroom, but if you have a child who may be thinking maybe I'm gay, or maybe I'm a lesbian and the teacher and staff make these comments accidentally then everyone and the whole school feels like it is not accepting of the LGBTQ student.

Christina stated,

> Parents sometimes might be in denial or want their children not to be [LGBTQ]. And many parents think the school is not the place and they want their children to talk about this to anyone. But you know, I have been fortunate enough to run across some great parents that were very accepting of their children and just wanted to make sure their children were happy and whole.

Angela specifically noted, "The biggest obstacle is mindset of leaders."

Jocelyn reported the following:

> If we are trying to provide [LGBTQ students] with an inclusive education we need to educate the teachers and the administration… Barriers from parental consent, and even barriers with getting consent from upper management or higher authority in the school to do that work, that's the biggest barrier.

All participants discussed a barrier to working with elementary and middle school children, who may identify as LGBTQ, is that younger children may not understand the vocabulary to express themselves fully. Each participant described this as the main reason why it is so important for the school social worker to be able to knowledgeably and effectively work with this population in the elementary and middle school setting. Steve, who has extensively worked with the transgender and nonbinary population, stated,

> Especially with elementary school kids, there are not those terms. There is not that understanding that comes with gender identity or that there is a gender nonbinary-ness. Sometimes there is not an understanding with lesbian, gay, bisexual; because developmentally, there is not a sexual understanding, and you

> might know that you are different, but if you don't have the sexualized attractions, you can't necessarily put your finger on what it means for you to feel different because of the normalization of heterosexuality.

Mary stated the following:

> It gets tricky because with students that young, you may have people who think you are promoting homosexuality [if it is discussed]. But I think it is what it is, and children are dealing with these thoughts, and maybe not at a point where they feel safe enough to share with their parents yet. You know, so many kids get the support from school first, for anything, not just the LGBTQ community, but you have a lot of kids who share things at school that they haven't yet shared with anyone because they may not be in a family where they can afford outside counseling so the school social worker is a person they know they can rely on.

Angela said,

> Most times, students find their refuge at school when they have no one else to talk to. School is their safe haven. But, a lot of times, parents may not sign a consent slip for a child to participate in such a program. Due to fears of their own, and so I think a component of it has to be the parent buy-in and meeting with parents and getting parents to understand why it's important, and alleviating some of their fears and anxiety around the subject.

Shannon reported the following:

> The biggest things, not that teachers are at fault, but sometimes children try to say things, and they don't know how to say it, and they may get shut down if they are

> taking too long to say it or they don't know how to verbalize it correctly. Because sometimes teachers, school administration, or school staff may abruptly end the dialogue that a student is trying to have. So, I think just normalizing it and having that open dialogue in the school and classroom setting is really important to have... That would open up dialogue with the students because many students may not be able to have a conversation with parents, adults in general, or their peers. So just helping to open up a dialogue to let students know they are not different and can speak about it.

Policies and procedures came up as a barrier with all participants. Two participants specifically cited geography as a barrier in regards to policies and procedures, reporting that in the southern regions of the United States and southern Louisiana, policies and procedures may be behind some other areas of the nation or other states. Christina reported,

> I believe that school policies and procedures intend to be open and accepting of all students. But I don't think that it is always that way. I do think a lot of times, we do have the correct policies and procedures in place, but the day-to-day practice may not always as open and accepting as it should be.

Shannon stated the following:

> Policies and procedures are a barrier because they are not supportive of [LGBTQ] students. I'd have to say that policies and procedures are the biggest hurdle. Time, obviously, like I said, is a barrier too and that's always going to be an issue but, we can always make due with our schedules the best that we can. But, policies

> and procedures we cannot, ourselves, change it on paper. So, if we are not advocating and educating and bringing these issues to the higher ups, and even if you do bring it to admin, that doesn't mean that any changes are going to actually be made. In Louisiana, they are a little behind the times with policies and procedures. I know there are a lot of places that are definitely more ahead of us in different areas, but where here they are definitely behind the times with the ways that policies and procedures are worded, and they are not open and accepting of all students. And it's not that we can even make outside referrals for extra support for LGBTQ students because there are just not a lot of services for students who may identify as LGBTQ in this area.

Steve verbalized,

> Parents [provide barriers] because it is such an ostracizing issue. Especially in this area…. In Louisiana, in the deep south. Although that's not necessarily true because it's the same everywhere. It's unfair to say that just the deep south is terrible because it's not like places, like the northeast, are that much better as a whole for the LGBTQ population.

Two of the six participants discussed religiosity and politics as specific barriers that impede school social workers and elementary and middle school settings as a whole regarding the LGBTQ population. Steve stated the following:

> I would say it's very religiously and politically charged when you are talking about LGBTQ issues. So that's a real barrier when you are trying to create a more

> inclusive atmosphere, but you are running into people's religious and political beliefs about right and wrong.

Christina reported,

> I think for school, I think we are always affected. Even though we are a school, we are affected by the religious and political beliefs of our community. Especially our state government, because they make the rules for what our schools look like. So, I think there is a bigger discussion than just what happens at the school. I think there is a discussion about our policies and our legislative issues in general.

Barriers discussed by participants affected the school social workers' ability to meet the specific support needs of the young LGBTQ student and the entire school climate. Most participants spoke directly to the school social worker's work as advocating for change through educating parents, administration, teachers, and students. The multifaceted roles of the school social worker are documented throughout all themes that emerged, which lead to discussions about not having the time to support a young LGBTQ student fully, and due to geographic barriers not being able to appropriately refer to outside mental health agencies due to, per the participants, not having referral sources for these especially vulnerable children. Many barriers were discussed within this theme to answer the research question; however, many positives were also discussed within the interviews that are noteworthy to be further focused on in the field of social work.

Theme 5: Positives and What Can Be Done

All participants mentioned positive societal advances, specifically within the last five years, which have created a more open view of LGBTQ populations. Many positive

advances and ideas for what can be done to better support young LGBTQ children were discussed by every participant interviewed. Positives were examined as negative case examples or in opposition to the barriers that were being explored within this research study. Positives included (a) "society getting better" and younger generations being more open and accepting, (b) more discussions and trainings being offered in recent years, (c) social workers recognizing that every individual situation is different and has unique needs, (d) "education is key," and (e) opening up dialogue and normalizing. Mary relayed the following information regarding "society getting better":

> I think we have come far with that, as far as being more open and accepting, but I still think we have a lot of work to do.

Jocelyn commented,

> I honestly, for some apparent reason, my views on LGBTQ is almost the norm now. Maybe it's just because I see it is more accepted now. Like it is okay, you know? You are who you are, and we are accepting it.

All six participants referenced more CEU training opportunities being offered within the last five years. Advancing your ability to understand and appreciate the complexity of individual intersectionality of identities is an important factor in providing adequate services and meeting the standard of cultural competency (see NASW, 2017; Robinson et al., 2016; Weinstock, 2019). Participants commented on recognizing each individual as having different life situations and different needs as an important positive take away from the six interviews. Concerning having more CEU opportunities over the

past few years, Christina reported that she had learned a lot that she did not previously know. Specifically, she verbalized the following:

> I just think it has given me a greater respect for the complexity of issues faced by those students. And it could be little things, like, you know, what bathroom to use. Things that we may not always think of, so it's the complexity of the issues.

Mary, discussing an appreciation for the individual nature of understanding one's own identity, said,

> I think it just takes learning and growing and seeing. I think students can put a name on it later, but it all depends on that child and that situation…I also think that we a lot of times are too quick to make children identify. It is like everything else, and you grow and evolve, and you kind of have to figure out like who you are, and sometimes as a society I think we are like, ok you have to pick a side. And I don't think that that is healthy or that is right.

Jocelyn reported,

> So, I believe each situation is different. Sometimes, you know, I believe that kids struggle with their identity. I believe that each child and situation is different. Some people are sure about who they are, and some people, it takes them a longer time to get there.

All participants discussed education as a barrier; however, education was also discussed by multiple participants as the key to the emancipation of societal norms and advocacy for young LGBTQ children. Participants discussed education, at all levels, needs to be more robust. Angela verbalized the following:

> But again, I'm going to go back to lack of education. If I'm not educated, and it doesn't become part of the norm or what is considered to be the norm, meaning that I need to be aware. If I'm not aware and enlightened, then I move through life without even addressing it... if we are trying to provide [LGBTQ children] with an inclusive education, we need to educate the teachers and the administration.

Jocelyn stated,

> Educating everyone. Every moment is a teaching moment, so no matter how you do it, creative ways are the best ways.

Christina specifically reported,

> By educating, you are also advocating… it goes back, again, to educating. Like educating the teachers on what is appropriate and in the best interest of all students. And if we educate, then the classroom becomes a more welcoming and safer environment, and the kids will want to be there.

Steve mentioned the key to supporting LGBTQ students, in his view:

> Just education. As far as the topic in general because it is something that a lot of people don't understand or might not have knowledge of.

Specifically, in regards to social work education, participants verbalized what they would change if they could go back now and change something regarding their master's level education to be more LGBTQ inclusive. Christina stated the following:

> I definitely think having more classes and having more options and not having it just as an elective and having it as a requirement would have been beneficial.

Mary reported,

> I think, maybe if [social work schools] had more discussions around LGBTQ issues, because a lot of the things I know now are just from on the job learning. I think just being a little bit more specific with dealing with that specific population. Because when I think about what I learned in school, I draw mainly from working with child, youth, and families and not specifically with working with LGBTQ population. So, I think just mainly having more course work around those issues and having those types of conversations would have been more helpful in my studies.

Steve said,

> I think if they include more LGBTQ discussions within the diversity courses they required. I know that, understandably, the diversity classes focus on a lot of race and sex. And there probably could have been better focus on gender identity and LGBTQ in general.

The final category listed within this theme of positive take-a-ways includes opening up dialogue and normalizing through classroom lessons, diversity representation, and all school areas. Normalizing the LGBTQ population within the school setting was cited by most participants as a positive way to shift the culture of the school away from a stance of heteronormativity. Participants discussed culture shifts towards more inclusivity would be a positive thing at the school level and for society as a whole. Angela remarked,

> If you normalize it and it becomes a part of the conversation, then it eventually becomes part of the culture. Because if I'm hearing about it and it's included in, it's not looked at as something wrong, bad, or different… And so, I think having

> it as part of a curriculum, having books in the classrooms, using examples…like, when they are doing math problems, and say they are doing a math problem where they are comparing something, and they are talking about a family, and instead of the family being Mary and Jack, the family is Mary and Sue have two children.

Shannon stated she felt it was important to "Normalize it in the classroom setting. Being able to have open conversations opens up dialogue."

Steve expressed,

> For the Tier 1 level, like work with the teacher to include things like in entrance or exit tickets, like identify positive qualities about yourself. English classes, you could fold that into vocab. I think at the very base levels, kind of back to one of our previous conversations, just let free play be free play. If a boy wants to play with a barbie, let him play with a barbie. If a girl wants to play with trucks, she can play with trucks. You know, if in that small percentage, there is a child who identifies as transgender or nonbinary, to use proper pronouns and to use their new name. You know, with the trans population, help develop better understanding that the name process of changing a name is a long process and that not calling them correctly can be triggering and even bullying, maybe even if you don't mean it. So, like that kind of thing where you get into higher levels, like in middle school it could be talking about social justice in history class, you teach about things like Stone Wall as a social justice movement. That you, maybe not

on the social work side, but on the curriculum side, you add in more LGBTQ-friendly or LGBTQ focused books into English class.

Educating, advocating, and normalizing LGBTQ issues within the elementary and middle school setting, per the participants, was a significant way to better support young LGBTQ children. There are many barriers discussed by participants; however, opening up dialogue and being more inclusive across the entire school environment is as important as the individual or family work that a social worker does with their students. A few participants felt that there is a long way to go in regards to the school becoming a more open and accepting environment for LGBTQ children; however, recognizing the individual needs, increasing education across the board, and speaking up when you see something wrong can create a safer, more welcoming environment for all.

Unexpected Findings

The proliferation of bias and prejudicial attitudes towards the LGBTQ community have been studied and empirically recognized throughout modern history within everyday subtle and overt ways within the United States, as well as within the school systems (Atterberry-Ash et al., 2019; Higa et al., 2014; The Human Rights Campaign, 2019; Moe et al., 2015; National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2019; Palmer & Greytak, 2017). School social workers, as an identified significant support figure on educational campuses, must be able to address the needs of this vulnerable population and meet their needs adequately and appropriately (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018; NASW, 2017; Sherman, 2016). The participants discussed many barriers that often are faced by the elementary or middle

school social worker regularly when trying to provide these specific support services to young LGBTQ students.

One unexpected finding was that school social workers feel that one of the biggest barriers is education across the board for all school employees. The school social worker was recognized, by participants, as needing more in-depth prior education and current training on the specific support needs for working with LGBTQ clientele. The school social worker participants also noted that there seemed to be a trickle-down effect where education should be increased for administration such that they would then be able to better support teachers, which would then trickle down to creating a more open and welcoming environment and education for students and their parents or caregivers. Participants spoke on the inability to meet young LGBTQ students' needs appropriately if they do not have the knowledge from their former school of social work education or from ongoing education through CEUs. Though the participants mentioned more CEUs are being offered within the past few years, only a few discussed things they have learned that bring value to their work with young LGBTQ students. One participant who has worked previously in a high school setting specifically remarked that there is a lack of education and understanding in regards to administration and teachers within the elementary and middle school setting, reporting that she has never seen a truly successful, open environment for LGBTQ children in lower education schools only in higher education schools. It was surprising that participants focused so much on the administration barrier and the need to specifically educate admin teams and seek their buy-in before anything could change for the positive.

Another unexpected finding was the barrier of time, which was reported as one of the most significant barriers by all participants. The school social worker's many roles, paired with the specific support needs for young children that might identify as LGBTQ, were specifically seen as detriments to ensuring appropriate and adequate services were provided within the school setting. Multiple participants took this one step further and discussed the inability to refer students for outside services, which could supplement the increased provision of support for young LGBTQ students due to lack of resources for the LGBTQ population within the school setting and community. Without the time to adequately meet these vulnerable students' needs, on the individual, school, or community level, elementary and middle school settings are left feeling like unsafe places (see Savage & Schanding, 2013).

A final unexpected finding was the specific focus of multiple participants who discussed heteronormativity specifically regarding preschool and younger grade classrooms. Participants' specific examples of heteronormativity, as seen in the school, frequently targeted prekindergarten and elementary school-aged grades, more so than middle school grades. It is interesting to note that gender identity and sexual orientation identities are being developed and reinforced during these formative years of development, which can hijack students' social development due to fear, isolation, and emotional distress (see Kohlberg, 1966; Kulick et al., 2019). Societal differences and acceptance of older children versus younger children, in regards to their ability to identify their own sexuality and gender identity, was discussed in the literature review, which specifically was discussed in relation to parental acceptance, with one participant

reporting parents were more open and accepting of LGBTQ topics when their children were in middle school and beyond. Younger children's inability to accurately verbalize, due to lacking the words to describe the differences they felt, was brought up by multiple participants, which leaves a gap of support specifically for these even younger LGBTQ children.

Development of sexuality or gender identity is a challenge for young LGBTQ children, without specific supports, due to the overarching heteronormativity and homophobia of U.S. institutions (see Seelman et al., 2015). Social development is hijacked by identification as part of the LGBTQ community due to fear, isolation, and emotional distress that interrupt positive psychological and emotional well-being (Kulick et al., 2019). Identification of being nonheterosexual is typically left up to the individual, and the conversation has to start with the child feeling confident and comfortable to openly discuss this with their parents, friends, teachers, and community (Olson et al., 2019). Internalized conflict due to religiosity, confusion, and internalized homogeneity cloud the young LGBTQ child's ability to positively cope with their feelings and identification (Lytle et al., 2018).

Kohlberg (1966) discussed, in his theory of gender development, that children already identify whether they are male or female around three to five years of age. Ages six to seven encompass children's ability to delineate differences in males and females' behavioral and personality patterns (Kohlberg, 1966). These gender roles are fairly concrete and almost nonnegotiable in society. Gender roles explicitly direct how society determines a person is to act, think, desire, behave, and react (Kohlberg, 1966). Further,

because gender norms vary from society to society, culture to culture, these concepts are taught to children from birth and constructs how they will be expected to get along in society for the remainder of their lives. Children's own self-concepts, at a young age, will affect how their interpersonal relationships will be throughout their lifespan; thus, being different from others at a young age can thwart a child's ability to connect and maintain interpersonal relationships for the remainder of their lives (Beal, 1994; Seelman et al., 2015).

As children meet developmental milestones, they are increasingly moving towards independence and being prepared to be successful as community members; thus, children are being taught how to, when to, and where to look for right and wrong. At first, children learn to rely on adults for guidance and reassurance (Piaget, 1952; Postholm, 2019). Children typically enjoy socializing and learn to form larger friendship groups and work cooperatively with others and learn social skills through play, school work, and class lessons throughout the school environment (Huyder et al., 2015). Development of an internalized, mature sense of right and wrong is developed around age 10, and children become increasingly able to think abstractly, moving from elementary to middle-school-age (Huyder et al., 2015). This development of self and identity is vastly different for heterosexual and nonheterosexual children; yet, schools teach everyone the same way, regardless of gender or sexual identity, and expect all children to develop towards a healthy, well-adjusted sense of self (see Klein et al., 2015).

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to explore the perceived barriers school social workers encounter when providing specific support services to young LGBTQ children in elementary and middle schools in a southeast Louisiana school district. Specifically, while social workers are trained to work in a multicultural world, there seems to be some underresearched gap in how this is aligned or misaligned with the viewpoint of the educational system, which hinders their ability to fully meet the needs of this young LGBTQ population (see Garbers et al., 2018). The participants were given space to openly discuss their perceived barriers when trying to provide specific support services to young LGBTQ children, along with educational challenges across the board, heteronormativity within the school setting and its impacts, professional and personal beliefs, culturally competent practice with this specific population, and positive societal advances and further avenues for support and advocacy. Because all six participants worked at a school setting that included both elementary and middle school students, it is hard to determine if developmental differences affect the discussed barriers with my selected study group. However, the majority of participants focused their discussions, regarding heteronormativity, specifically on examples from elementary-level grades.

The themes that emerged from the qualitative, semistructured interviews answer this study's research question, which was: What are the perceived barriers school social workers experience when providing services to young LGBTQ children, in elementary and middle school settings, in a southeast Louisiana school district? Specifically, participants were able to verbalize their perceived barriers regarding time, lack of

education specific to LGBTQ issues, heteronormativity being built into the educational system, administration barriers, parent barriers, teacher barriers, policies and procedures, and religiosity and political barriers. Section 4 will follow to provide applicability to professional ethics in social work practice and recommendations for social work practice based on findings. The usefulness, transferability, limitations, recommendations for further research, and dissemination plans will also be discussed.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to explore the perceived barriers school social workers encounter when providing services to young LGBTQ children in elementary and middle schools in a southeast Louisiana school district. Specifically, while social workers are trained to work in a multicultural world, there is an underresearched gap in practice between the licensed school social worker's education and ability to meet the needs of young LGBTQ students due to systemic issues within school systems in the United States, which creates barriers that can prevent the school social worker from providing these services to young LGBTQ children (Garbers et al., 2018). I used a purposive sample of six school social workers employed in Southeast Louisiana elementary or middle school settings. In this qualitative exploratory study, I used semistructured interview questions designed to gather data on perceived barriers that school social workers face when providing services to young LGBTQ students. This study supports the NASW (2017) Code of Ethics mission to ensure that equality and social justice advocacy is provided to these extremely vulnerable young people in society. This study also supports the tenants of cultural competency and advocacy and fulfills the urge for social workers to conduct empirically grounded research and disseminate information to further the knowledgebase of the field of social work.

The following themes emerged out of data collection: (a) social work education and understanding of heteronormativity, (b) heteronormativity and the school systems, (c) beliefs and values, (d) barriers, and (e) positives and what can be done. In the summary of findings, Section 3, I described school social workers' perceived barriers when

providing services to young LGBTQ children as well as highlighted the positive findings discussed by participants. These findings may assist in identifying what is going well in regards to this specific phenomenon and how social workers can further scaffold and build upon positive social change.

In Section 4, I describe the application for professional ethics in social work practice, recommendations for the social work field, implications for social change, and a summary of the research.

Application for Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

This research study supports and promotes emancipation of societal heteronormative stances, advocacy, improved work with social work clients, dignity and worth of the individual, and improved practice through dissemination of knowledge to other practitioners (see NASW, 2017). To empower and promote enhanced well-being for young LGBTQ children, the school social worker can promote positive social justice and social change by facilitating the creation of an educational environment that satisfies the needs of all students and not just the majority members of society through emancipation and liberation of the societal heteronormative indoctrination that plagues modern day educational facilities (see Bohman, 1999; Horkheimer, 1972; NASW, 2017). Understanding the barriers to successful service provision with this specific population helps to guide social work practices by promoting positive social change by ensuring better support for all children in school systems, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation.

This study promotes the professional value of competence by helping to recognize and contribute to the field using a strengths-based view of the barriers as well as by helping further promote better service provision for young LGBTQ students (see Craig & Furman, 2018; NASW, 2017). The dual view of promoting emancipation and social justice for young LGBTQ children as well as promoting a greater societal change in regards to the damaging effects of heteronormativity at the elementary and middle school level through the exploration of barriers for the school social worker that need to be addressed and mitigated to promote equality for all students meets the ethical principal of dignity and worth of the individual (see NASW, 2017; Urban & Kujinga, 2017). Investigating the barriers as perceived by the school social workers helps to display the misalignment between the educational facility's policies, procedures, and day-to-day operations with the school social workers' duty to protect all students and provide equal access to education without oppression in the elementary and middle school setting (see Austin et al., 2019).

Finally, this study supports the professional value to provide appropriate, educated, skillful service to disadvantaged members of society via the exploratory look at the barriers and specific needs of the social worker to better meet the needs of all clients to address the societal enforcement of oppression, marginalization, and erasure of LGBTQ bodies (see Kearns et al., 2017; NASW, 2017; Wagner & Crowley, 2020). School social workers do not work in isolation at the elementary and middle school setting. As part of an interdisciplinary team, this study supports this value of the profession by understanding the specific needs of young LGBTQ children as well as

school social worker to ensure that the social worker is able to meet professional and ethical obligations to participate and contribute to the multidisciplinary school team in ways to promote a more equitable and welcoming environment for all children (see NASW, 2017).

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

This study was intended to explore and inform elementary and middle school social workers on the perceived barriers to adequate service provision for the young LGBTQ population. School social workers are the school-to-home liaison, tasked with ensuring the mental health and wellbeing of all students on their school campus, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Sherman, 2016). Due to the overarching heteronormative stance of U.S. society and the indoctrination of societal norms throughout educational facilities, it is important to understand the barriers as a way to promote positive social change by building on what is going well for the school social worker in this area (Kulick et al., 2019; McBride & Schubotz, 2017). Social workers who provide services in a culturally competent, nonjudgmental way are able to engage with clientele with respect for the dignity and worth of the individual (NASW, 2017).

To meet the ethical principal of competence, social workers must ensure that they are knowledgeable in regards to the needs of their clientele (NASW, 2017). Social workers must ensure that they are practicing within the boundaries of their education and training; thus, competence starts with education. Former education within social work school, as well as research, careful professional judgement, and ongoing educational trainings through CEUs help the social worker to be competent and provide services that

promote the well-being of their clients. In regards to education, the participants in this study recommended that more is needed for school social workers who practice with young LGBTQ students, as they felt they were not formally trained to adequately meet the needs of this specific population. As one participant stated, very poignantly, "Education is key."

Despite almost all participants guessing correctly, five out of six, all but one participant stated that they had not previously heard the term "heteronormativity," further leading to the finding that education surrounding LGBTQ issues needs to be adequately addressed by schools of social work, prior to field work, as well as CEU trainings, ongoing. All six participants noted a lack of LGBTQ-specific education prior to field work as being a barrier to LGBTQ student service provision. Along with the social work field as a whole focusing more on education regarding LGBTQ issues, school social workers are specifically trained differently than other professionals in a school building and thus should ensure that they have the training and education to specifically advocate for this vulnerable population as part of the school's interdisciplinary team (Finigan-Carr & Shaia, 2018; NASW, 2017). Participants noted the need for school social workers to help educate and train other school staff, teachers, and administration, specifically on providing a safe, secure, and welcoming environment for young LGBTQ children. School social workers can provide professional development trainings to staff specifically on how to work with children who may identify as LGBTQ, how to reduce stigma and bias in their classrooms, how to create safe and supportive classrooms, and how to better alleviate fears and isolation for their young LGBTQ students.

Participants mentioned that heteronormativity is a barrier that is built into the educational system, specifically in the formative years, younger grade-levels. Specifically, participants mentioned prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms as the main areas of indoctrinating societal heteronormative views by delegating who can and cannot play with specific toys; how the teacher greets and separates students based on gender; and how boys and girls should behave, dress, and socialize. Researchers have indicated that schools are the key environment in which children are ridiculed, harassed, and victimized for their young LGBTQ identities (Atterberry-Ash et al., 2019; Seelman et al., 2015). Kull et al. (2016) described that heteronormativity built into the educational institution creates an atmosphere that is hostile for LGBTQ children. Without specific protection, young LGBTQ children are bullied and victimized at higher rates than their heterosexual peers, which results in increased suicidal ideation, increased suicide attempts, internalized discord, depression, shame, anger, fear, vulnerability, depression, grief, avoidance of school and other environments, isolation, increase risky sexual activity, and increased drug and substance usage (Ali & Barden, 2015; McCormick et al., 2015).

The school social worker provides mental health services, policy advocacy, education, and resource linkage to students and families. Participants discussed society becoming more accepting and younger generations of children being more open and welcoming, which is a positive move towards social change; however, participants stated there is still work to be done on the school level in general. School social workers can promote better antibiased school settings with advocacy for LGBTQ issues with

administration, policy makers, and school district leaders. Breaking down stereotypes and beliefs of privilege based on one's group identification is necessary to combat the societal injustices toward people who are different than themselves.

Social workers are ethically bound, through the profession's mission, to enhance human well-being, specifically focused on the needs of those who are vulnerable or oppressed (NASW, 2017). Advocating for the betterment of human well-being requires a social worker to advocate on behalf of others who frequently identify with differing life events and circumstances than themselves. School social workers should work as allies for young LGBTQ children by encouraging nonjudgmental discourse with others, be that students, faculty, administration, or parents (Cooper & Lesser, 2015).

Alliance building, by itself, does not have the power to elicit change. Social workers also need to work with policymakers and lawyers to provide testimonials to humanize the often antiquated and complex legal concepts that degrade and make minorities invisible to those in power, such as heteronormativity (Federico, 2013). According to LaMantia, Wagner, and Bohecker (2015), becoming an ally requires competency in working with others who are different from yourself, recognizing similarities with your plights and worldview, and promoting diversity and inclusionary policies for all. Learning what others have or are going through in their daily lives is key to advocating on their behalf for the things that need to change as they see them.

Participants noted that time, policies and procedures, administration, teachers, and parents could all be barriers to appropriate service provision for young LGBTQ students. By continuing to advocate for those who are disenfranchised by society, social workers

can speak up and provide research and empirically gathered data to become a broker of change towards social justice and policy reform (see Eagly, 2016). Shared knowledge regarding the barriers, which all can be summarized into more education needed for everyone, school social workers can act as change agents and social advocates for young LGBTQ children by opening up a dialogue to help normalize the LGBTQ experience at all school levels, recognize the individual needs of every child, and educate the world.

Usefulness of the Findings

This study's findings aid in the school social worker's ability to navigate the barriers of working with young LGBTQ children. Because social workers are documented as providing more mental health services to all groups of disadvantaged individuals over all other allied health professionals, school social workers must be able to meet the needs of this specific population (see Craig et al., 2016). There is a dearth of literature regarding school social workers and the provision of services for young LGBTQ populations in the United States, and this study provides a foundational exploration to expand the research base of practice knowledge further.

The results of this study allow me to be able to speak on the barriers and gaps in services that are faced by school social workers and their young LGBTQ clientele in Southeast Louisiana to become a broker of positive social change and disseminate information to other social workers in the field to advance the knowledgebase for all practitioners further. The findings that LGBTQ-specific education is lacking for all professionals within the educational system open the door for the field of social work, with a foundational focus on alleviating barriers to well-being, to be the change in their

respective agencies, organizations, and settings. Thus, social workers can examine and advocate for LGBTQ-inclusive policies, educate all stakeholders, and promote a more inclusive and supportive environment for all people regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation.

Transferability of the Findings

This study was specific to school social work practice, in elementary and middle school settings in Southeast Louisiana, and therefore is not generalizable. However, the findings can be shared with the social work profession to address critical gaps in practice specific to working with young LGBTQ children and facilitate further focused research and work in the field. This qualitative research study had a group of six study participants who specifically work in elementary and middle school settings in Southeast Louisiana; thus, finings can be used to help expand clinicians' knowledge about the barriers and what could best support young LGBTQ children within their practice setting.

Limitations of the Findings

This study's limitations are due to the specific geographic location, Southeast Louisiana, paired with the small, purposive sample size ($N = 6$) of elementary and middle school social workers; thus, results may not be generalized to all social work practices with young LGBTQ children. External validity for this study is limited; however, based on the detailed description of the methodology, participant inclusion criteria, instrumentation, and data analysis; other social work researchers may replicate the design of this study; however, results with different populations may have different outcomes. All participants of this study were licensed social workers, working as a school social

worker as a school district employee within Louisiana. Thus, dependent on state licensure requirements and worksite, results may not be generalizable to all school social workers who may work for agencies and are contracted by the school as they may have different job roles, responsibilities, and duties.

Another limitation of this study was that with the purposeful, homogenous sample, and geographic specificity, I chose not to gather demographic information to increase participants' confidentiality and anonymity. Future research studies may find the ability to examine years of experience, educational degree, or other demographic information to be necessary for comparison or investigation of the chosen phenomenon. Finally, because all six participants worked in a school setting that included both elementary and middle school students, this study was unable to determine if some barriers may be more prevalent in the work of an elementary school social worker or a middle school social worker. Further research to delineate if developmental differences between elementary-age and middle-school-age children create different barriers for the school social worker is recommended; however, most participants did discuss barriers concerning younger grade children specifically.

Recommendations for Further Research

There is a lack of knowledge on the perceived barriers school social workers face when providing specific services to meet young LGBTQ children's needs. Social workers are prepared, through their education, to work within the multicultural world; however, some barriers preclude them from being able to provide services that adequately meet the needs of LGBTQ children in elementary and middle school settings. Research is

recommended to gain further data and understanding of school social workers' perspectives on the barriers to providing adequate services to young LGBTQ children within elementary and middle school settings outside of Southeast Louisiana. Further research is also recommended to include school social workers who may work for agencies that contract their employees to school sites to determine if they have different job duties, roles, and responsibilities that alter their perceptions of the barriers faced when providing services to young LGBTQ children.

Dissemination of the Research

Dissemination this research project's findings will be through a multipronged approach as a way to advance the theoretical understanding and knowledgebase of the field of social work. As part of Walden University's social change mission, I plan to make the final paper and results available to the community and stakeholders covered by this study following degree conferment. A 1-2-page summary, including procedures, topics, background, and findings, will be made available to all stakeholders at that time. This summary will be brief and digestible for stakeholders, in this case, school social workers, to understand and hopefully incorporate into their everyday practice considerations when working with young LGBTQ students. Also, I plan to submit the results of this study to a peer-reviewed social work journal for publication to further the knowledgebase of the field of social work in supporting young LGBTQ students in schools. This plan is in an effort to support school social workers, as understanding the barriers to providing specific supports to young LGBTQ youth creates greater social change through the work school social workers do with students daily, on a quest to

create an atmosphere of safety and support for all students to have equal access to education.

Implications for Social Change

Positive social change is the purposeful process of coordinating efforts to promote greater equality, dignity, and enhancement of life for those who are disadvantaged by society (Thomas et al., 2009; Walden University, 2015; Walden University, 2017). This study's results contribute to the betterment of society through a greater understanding of the unique perceived barriers that may preclude school social workers, in elementary and middle schools, from providing adequate services to young LGBTQ members. This qualitative exploratory research study has promise for positive social change by contributing to the social work knowledge base on school social workers' perceived barriers when providing services to young LGBTQ children. Good qualitative research is comprehensive in nature and allows a greater ability to observe and understand a social phenomenon more completely in the natural, real-world setting (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As science is thought of as both a body of knowledge and a process, qualitative studies allow investigation of ongoing realities that cannot be predicted in advance (see Rubin & Babbie, 2013; Smith, 1984).

This qualitative exploratory study can contribute to the field of social work in relation to practice, research, and policy due to the rich data and descriptions provided. School social workers provide mental health services and ensure that all academic barriers are removed for students to be successful at school (Palmer & Greytak, 2017). Young LGBTQ-student service provision is underresearched, and education on this

specific population is lacking for social workers as schools of social work, themselves, exist within a historically heteronormative environment (see Craig et al., 2018; Dentato et al., 2016). Social work education on the understanding of the cycle of coming out process, as well as the ethics involved in working with clients who may not understand their identity yet, is important and could help improve the ability of the school social worker to improve rejection of the status quo on their school campuses to help emancipate and overcome the steadfast adherence to heteronormativity.

Understanding the perceived barriers discussed within this study can help shed light on the biggest obstacles school social workers state they face in working with young LGBTQ children. To better combat the barriers of gender identity and sexual orientation inequities within school policies, school social workers could seek out and be equipped to better train faculty and staff members and all stakeholders who play a role in school policy creation and enforcement. Finally, school social workers who work with young LGBTQ children can understand that the impotence is on working with a top-down approach to help support the individual LGBTQ-identifying child. School social workers can create a safe space for a child; however, if the whole school is not a safe space, then no space is a safe space. This study provides a greater understanding of how heteronormativity is embedded into the school culture and climate to equip the school social worker to better recognize and respond to the young LGBTQ students' unique needs.

Summary

Schools are a microcosm of society that indoctrinate heteronormativity such that young LGBTQ-identifying children are marginalized, discriminated against, and completely forgotten or negated daily. Social workers are trained to work within the multicultural world; however, some barriers inhibit their ability to meet the unique support needs of young LGBTQ students within U.S. elementary and middle school settings. LGBTQ children are reminded that they are "less than" their heterosexual peers daily via messages they hear from peers, teachers, administration, policies, and procedures. LGBTQ children face pervasive negative factors, such as increased risk to self-harm, increased susceptibility for suicidal ideation, increased associations with homelessness either by force or by fear, increased risk-taking behaviors, and decreased supportive services that contribute to disparities in their overall mental and physical health and well-being. This study examined school social workers' perceived barriers when providing services to young LGBTQ children in elementary and middle school settings to challenge societies' hostile, unsafe, and harmful school environments. The school social worker participants for this study voiced dedication and desire to help young LGBTQ children within the school setting, despite barriers and obstacles they perceived as impeding their ability to do so adequately. Eight major barriers were discussed: (a) time, (b) lack of LGBTQ-specific education, (c) heteronormativity built into the school system, (d) administration, teacher, and parental barriers, (e) children's understanding and ability to express themselves, (f) policies and procedures, (g) geographic location barriers, and (h) religiosity and political barriers. Participants

collectively voiced concern with the lack of education across the board for all persons within the educational arena (administration, teachers, parents, students, policymakers, and social workers).

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Appendix: Individual Interview Question Guide

1. Were LGBTQ issues part of the social work curriculum you were taught in college?
    a. Can you tell me a little about what you remember from social work school as it pertains to LGBTQ clientele?
    b. If you could go back now, what do you think your college could have done to prepare you specifically to work with children who may identify as LGBTQ?
2. How many CEU trainings have you participated in related to, or discussing, LGBTQ issues in the last five years?
    a. What did you learn that you did not previously know from one of the CEU trainings you attended?
3. What does heteronormativity mean to you?
    a. Can you give an example?
4. What does heteronormativity mean as it relates to classroom and school environment?
    a. Heteronormativity is defined as the privileged default of human sexual identity, and presumption of heterosexuality. An example of this would be like if someone would say to a young boy, “you are going to be some lucky woman’s knight in shining armor one day.” Presuming that everyone is heterosexual and anything else would be deemed “different” or not normal. Can you give an example of something you maybe have

seen, heard, or could imagine that might display heteronormativity at an elementary or middle school which might lead a young child to feel like heterosexuality is the norm?

5. Do you believe young children can accurately identify themselves as LGBTQ?
    a. Can you elaborate on your choice?
6. What do you believe is the role of the school social worker in protecting and advocating for LGBTQ inclusive issues at an elementary or middle school setting?
    a. Please describe which of these roles you feel are most important.
7. What is the role of the school social worker in challenging heteronormativity within the classroom setting?
    a. Are there any examples you could share?
8. Do you believe that elementary and middle school policies and procedures are open and accepting of all students regardless of race, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, and ability?
    a. Can you please provide examples of how they are or are not?
9. In your opinion, what are the biggest obstacles for LGBTQ students within the school setting?
    a. Do any specific obstacles seem like they are more difficult to assist the child?
10. In your opinion, how does culturally competency look in regards to service provision to young LGBTQ children?

a. Can you give an example?

11. What barriers do you see to providing culturally competent services to young LGBTQ children?
    a. Which barriers are most challenging in your quest to support a student who may identify as LGBTQ?
12. What do you believe students and faculty can do to promote the health and well-being of LGBTQ children?
    a. Have you seen any of these examples as more successful at your school?
    b. What is one thing that you think would make an LGBTQ child feel welcome in an elementary or middle school setting?
13. Do you believe student's families or parents provide obstacles in providing culturally competent services to young children who may identify as an LGBTQ member?
    a. Can you give an example?
14. Based on your opinion, how does discussion of LGBTQ issues within school lessons help challenge heteronormativity at school and in greater society?
    a. Can you give an example?
15. In your view, is there a way an elementary or middle school setting could advance the educational policies regarding heteronormativity and LGBTQ issues?
    a. What do you believe should be done to change or create a more open and accepting environment for all?